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MAUDE TALBOT.

BY

HOLME LEE.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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CHAPTER I.

BYE SCENES.

MAUDE TALBOT'S stay in London was prolonged far beyond the time she originally intended. The élite of the fashionable crowd had abandoned the dusty town for watering-places, at home and abroad; but still the Clares lingered, and with them the Lady of Houghton. It would be difficult to say what kept Maude there, unless it were that constant excitement was become necessary to her, in her unquiet state of mind. She had a restless craving after society; she had ceased to enjoy her tranquil mornings in her boudoir, preferring the inane gossip of Sara and Ada Clare, which had been so distasteful, to her own rebuking thoughts. She saw little of

Mr Warburton, for he was eminently a man of business, and he worked in his vocation; and what little she did see, caused torture rather than pleasure.

The Marquis of Salford followed her assiduously, and kept less distinguished admirers at a distance; for there were few presumptuous enough to enter the lists of love against such a rival. It was beginning to be understood in society, that an alliance would eventually take place between the heir of Netherby and the rich Miss Talbot: more than one fashionable paper had circulated the rumour: but by the middle of July the Marquis himself had got no farther, in the progress of his supposed courtship, than he had done at their second interview. The fact was, the man of the world was not deceived in Maude, as Maude was in him: he did not mistake her soft, shy manner towards him for love; and he could not make up his mind to marry without it. Annie Carey still held the first place in his heart, and he could not conceal from himself that a union with Maude would be one of ambition and expedience. No wonder, then, that

he hesitated to enter into it. Maude could not understand him. Sometimes she was disposed to think herself trifled with; but then, she instantly scouted the idea as one unworthy of her.

Matters stood thus, when the old Duke fell ill, and was ordered to Germany for the autumn: his son accompanied him. Lady Riversdale invited Maude to accompany her in a tour through France; but, after speculating on what the world would say, she determined not to go, and suddenly resolved to return to Houghton, and continue her arrangements for the benefit of her poor people, none of which had been carried out during her absence.

A school, indeed, had been erected at Hillside, but neither master nor mistress had been found to take charge of its unruly juvenile population; so it stood empty, and served as a target for the reception of the various missiles hurled at it by the anti-birch-and-book society. Mr Burr had memorialized Miss Talbot on the subject; but she, in the multiplicity of her engagements, had simply reenclosed his letter to Mr Wylie, her man-of-

business, desiring him to see that everything necessary was done as early as possible.

Mr Wylie, being on principle opposed to the education of the people, and, by temperament, dilatory in his movements, went very languidly about the matter, offering a stipend which nobody would accept, and representing the position as one of such difficulty, than none but a very enterprising and reckless person would have ventured to take it.

Neither was the condition of the people on the Hardwicke property, as it was called, any way ameliorated. The contract which Maude had planned for the building of new dwellings for the factory people, had fallen through from Mr Wylie's mismanagement; and still did the wretched people congregate by dozens and by scores in their foul, stifling habitations. The weekly rents were still collected by the same hard-visaged deputy of Mr Wylie, and without mercy were the miserable creatures summarily ejected, if the weekly pay were not forthcoming to the hour. Complaints were rife amongst the people. Want, disease, and scarcity of work had done their appointed

duty. The grave-yard of St Grim's had received more than its usual complement of dead. The murmurs had swelled into threats from time to time, and several serious strikes amongst the workmen had greatly increased that suffering which the misguided men had thought to mitigate.

The quiet dwellers within Old Court listened to the ominous echoes of these troubles without, repeated by those whose necessary business brought them to Mistress Martha's domain. The old servant lifted up her hands, and sighed and moaned in her particular way, and then broke out into a torrent of invective against the mill-owners, declaring they would get their deserts; for what could be expected of men ground down in their wages as those factory folk were, but that, when their wrongs grew past endurance, they should turn against their oppressors?

Martha, ever staunch to her faith, would not hear a word against Miss Talbot about the wretched places where people were dying out of fever. "It was all her bailiff's fault," said the old woman; "she was in London, and

could not be expected to take note of such matters. What did she keep people for, if she were to go herself poking into lanes and alleys to see what was going on amiss?" Some daring old woman, who suffered from the bad times, ventured to suggest, that property has its duties as well as its pleasures, and that people cannot always do their duty by deputy, and that perhaps this fine lady might hereafter be found to have neglected hers in giving it out of her own hands into those of such a man as her bailiff. Mistress Martha was silenced: some such thought had obtrusively forced itself upon her mind of late; but as an old retainer of the family, she could neither give it vent herself, nor suffer any one else to do so in her presence, unrebuked.

Mrs Powys and Martha had many a long discussion on the subject, and both secretly wondered what could have become of Miss Talbot's schemes for the benefit of the people, and wished she would come down amongst them to witness the doings and misdoings of her agents.

The distress and complainings were at their

height when the Jefferson family removed from Staunton to the town. They took up their abode in some small rooms over a huckster's shop, close by Old Court. Their home consisted of one moderate-sized room, in which the house-clock made the best appearance in the way of furniture, and two small garrets, in one of which slept the two little girls and the woman of the shop, and in the other Mark Jefferson and his son. Poor as these rooms were, and bare, the Jeffersons were sumptuously lodged in comparison with most of their neighbours; but the close air and unwholesome quality of food, soon began to tell on the health of the old man and the children.

Their main dependence was, of course, on the labour of Frank Jefferson; but he, like many cleverish men of his class, was not fond of regular employment: he could do a hand's turn at almost everything, but he was not stable enough for anything. The girls, however, went to school—a pretentious third-rate place, where their associates were somewhat above themselves, being children of small tradesmen. It was a doubtful matter to the

grandfather, whether they would not have been better without such education as they were receiving; but as the girls liked it themselves, and their father was proud of the improvement they made, it was suffered to pass; so Jessie grew vain and pretty, and Nellie quick-tempered and self-assured. There were two good hearts at bottom, however, poor motherless bairns!

CHAPTER II.

GLIMPSES OF MAUDE'S HUMOURS.

THE height of summer does not make Old Court look lively. The factory chimneys seem resolved that it shall change its complexion once for all, and stand black and grim for ever more. There has been a furious thunder-storm, which has cleared the air elsewhere, and freshened the grass and trees, parched with a long drought; but the only effect it has had on the Lady's Hospital, is to make the ivy hang dank and discoloured from the walls, and to give it a general aspect of gloom and damp.

Mrs Powys is in the Oriel room, standing by the window, resting her elbow on the frame, and her forehead on her hand. Though it is

only four o'clock by the day, it is almost twilight there. The old governess is in a pensive mood; having a kind heart, she cannot see, without feelings of compassion, the miseries that challenge her notice wherever she goes: miseries she cannot alleviate, in one case in a thousand. She stands watching the little door in the wall for half-an-hour or more, an expression of blank disappointment and weariness creeping over her face. Usually Mrs Powys is a calm person, patiently acquiescing in everything that happens to herself; but for once she is sorely tempted to become impatient. Now she leaves her position by the window; paces the room to and fro; stirs the fire; stands looking into the bright coals; changing her rings from one finger to the other, as is her practice when put out of her way at all; rouses her tiny spaniel, sleeping cosily on a soft cushion before the fire; and finally rings the bell, saying, as the sharp tinkle sounds through the silent house, "how foolish she is!'

Martha comes in, looking not an hour older than when we first introduced her to the

reader, with a cap of the same pattern, and a dress of the same cut, gaunt and uncompromising as ever. She stands still at the door, the handle in her hand, and waits to be questioned.

"Martha, are you sure it was Miss Talbot you saw this morning: were you not mistaken in the person, think you?" said Mrs Powys, turning towards her. Martha advanced a few paces further into the room.

"No mistake at all, ma'am: it was the carriage, and livery, and all," replied the old woman resolutely, as if offended at her veracity being impugned. "No mistake at all, ma'am, I do assure you! There was Miss Talbot herself, as bright as need be, and that proud peacock of a Mam'selle Aimée, and Saunders, and the coachman, and a smart young lacquey. And Mr Bell at the Royal came to the inn-door himself, and received her, as in duty bound: not that many of them hotel-keepers does it; for I think folks are forgetting who is quality and who is not, now-a-days. Besides, ma'am, if I had not known Miss Talbot, I must surely have known them

black horses. The Talbots always drive four black horses; prancing, and champing, and chafing, they always are: not in that respect altogether unlike their masters o' lang syne. Then there was Mr Wylie, hat in hand, bowing and scraping like them foreign dancing-masters, and grinning and shewing his white teeth, as polite as could be."

"It is too late for her to come now, I think: bring some coal, Martha!" answered Mrs Powys, sitting down by the windows to continue her watch notwithstanding.

"It is not so cold out of doors," remarked the servant.

"Oh, no! but it has a friendly look has a fire, in the worst of times, Martha," said the ci-devant governess: "indeed, I dearly love my fire; I can never do without it again. I should grow timid of my own shadow on the wall, if I had not something familiar to keep me company."

"That is just my feel about a fire, ma'am. Why, yes! how one can sit thinking over it of old times: it is just the string that one hangs one's odd fancies on. Yes, it is a rare cheery

thing is a bit of fire. I'm never without, waking. I always pity poor folk most when their rooms hav'nt a spark in the grate, nor a brand on the hearth!"

Martha poked up the fire as she spoke, and the flame made the burnished wainscot shine and glimmer again in its flickering light. She stood drawn up before it for a few seconds, with her keen grey eyes rather dimmed by the moisture which that last thought of hers had called to them, and then she turned towards the door.

At that instant a tremendous peal of the bell at the outside gate startled every echo of Old Court from its repose. Martha was down stairs, out at the hall-door, and scudding across the wet court-yard in recklessly thin slippers, before Mrs Powys' nerves had recovered the shock the ring gave them, and before Dot had half finished his indignant bark at having his slumbers so rudely interrupted. It took Martha several minutes to undo the fastenings of the rarely-opened gate; but at last, when thrown wide open, in rolled one of the Royal's hack cabs, with Saunders

sitting by the driver, his nose rather more elevated in the air than usual, evidently musing on his position as very *infra dig.*—actually elbowing a common cabman.

The moment the door of the vehicle was opened, Miss Talbot descended from it, and followed Martha up the steps into the Hall; then there was a quick step on the stairs—the door of the Oriel room was thrown wide open, and Mrs Powys was clasped in the arms of her former pupil.

"Oh, dear old friend! How glad I am to see you! another kiss! Come to the light and let me look at you! Bless your kind, grave face—it is as good as ever!" exclaimed Maude, rapidly. "Another kiss to drive those tears from your eyes! Well, I have come to spend an hour with you, to enliven your solitude. Come, say you are glad to see me: let me hear your pleasant little voice!"

"I am glad to see you, Maude! I have been looking for you all the afternoon, for Martha came in with the news this morning that you were seen entering the Royal Hotel. I had almost given you up, but not without

disappointment. And now that you are here at last, tell me how you are. Take off your bonnet! let me see if London gaieties have stolen any bloom from your cheek, or any light from your eyes," said Mrs Powys, drawing Maude to the light. The young lady threw aside her bonnet, and shook loose the long ringlets of her hair, laughing.

"You must not look for a very grave and reverend person yet," said she.

"Let me take your cloak, Miss Talbot?" said Martha, coming forward from the fire, which she had been again renewing, though the temperature of the room was already at boiling-point.

"Thanks!" replied Maude, allowing the old servant to disencumber her of all her out-door wraps—"thanks! There must be something in the air of this place that makes everybody look preternaturally solemn. Even you, Martha, wear as grave a look as if you had all the affairs of the nation to settle. I must have you over at the Priory to renovate your faded face, my ancient friend!"

"You forget, Miss Talbot, I am not so

young as I have been: there is a mighty difference between eighteen and eighty," replied Martha, drawing herself up.

"Is that your age? Then you must know Cyrus Evelyn," exclaimed Maude.

"Sure an' do I, madam—his coming to the Hall here first, and going off to Houghton with the family. Not that I knew him: oh no! I was only under the housekeeper then, and he was quite the gentleman, was Mr Evelyn. Ay, sure, and wedded to his books. I never see such a man for books in my life. A very handsome likely man too he was: such curling brown hair!"

"Well, you would not know him now, if that is your impression, Martha, for his locks are as white as snow," answered Maude.

"Sure an' age comes on fast: but such a fine, straight, young man as he was—dear, dear!" said Martha, musingly; and, with a curtsey such as an old retainer of the family judged fit reverence to the heiress of all the Talbots, she left the room.

"Let us sit down now, and tell me how the time has passed with you," said Maude, seat-

ing herself on a low chair by the window, and folding her hands on her knees, bending slightly forward. Mrs Powys was looking intently into her face with a saddened expression.

"What does it mean?" she murmured to herself.

"You say nothing! Why do you look at me with that face you used to put on when I had been a particularly wilful child?" asked Maude, suddenly. "I know what you are thinking and feeling! I know it all! You are thinking that I have not fulfilled the promise of my girlhood; and you are right! I have not:—I never shall! I never shall!"

There was a passionate earnestness in her manner that startled the old governess.

"You used to think that I was energetic; that I had good impulses, and that I should work them out, and be of use in my day and generation. I thought so once myself; but it is not so! I am weak, vacillating, unsteady!"

"Oh Maude! if you would listen to your heart you would be well," replied Mrs Powys, seating herself beside her, and taking her hand.

"You have warned me before; but it will out. Why am I ambitious? why am I proud? Is it not a woman's vocation to love and rest? But I cannot rest. I must fulfil my destiny: and that is not happiness," exclaimed Maude.

"It is in your own hands yet to mould it as you will," returned Mrs Powys. "Now, tell me quietly how it is with you: how it is you have begun to sorrow so soon? You have no truer friend than I—speak out!"

"Yes, you are a second mother to me! Why did you leave me?" said Maude.

"Because the Lady of Houghton ought to be mistress of herself; and, too, because I knew that when her own heart failed, so would every other influence. I am not so strong as the Talbot pride, Maude," returned Mrs Powys.

"Let me tell you all!"

Then in the quiet of the summer evening, Maude "eased her bosom of that perilous stuff" which weighed upon it so heavily. She told all her gentler thoughts as well as her prouder ones. Nobody could have understood. her so well as Mrs Powys, who had

watched this strong passion of pride growing up within her. From her alone could Maude bear counsel; but it was never given in a dictating manner: it was most of all like a mother speaking to a wayward best-beloved child. They talked together freely and earnestly, and Maude was happier than she had been for weeks.

"My first wish is to see you happy. Your own feelings are the best guides there. No one can teach you that, Maude!" said Mrs Powys, when she had heard all.

"Oh! I feel I am not what I might be: I am so wavering," returned Maude. "Not six months ago, I was happy: I thought myself secure from any touch of sorrow. Day-dreams, for the making of all about me prosperous, filled my imagination, and day-dreams they have proved: of all I planned, and schemed, and hoped, what has been done?—nothing: absolutely nothing! You must despise me. Oh! I despise myself entirely. As I came here, I saw misery, and want, and every loathsome sign of an uncared-for poverty; and I said to myself, 'This may be laid at my

door: these people live on my property, and I ought to look after them; here is one obvious duty neglected.' I intended to amend it; I wished to amend it; but no sooner do private interests intrude, than I forget all, or leave my duty to be done by others, who think, doubtless, if I neglect it, why should not they? I am growing distrustful of myself; I feel—I know, I shall do no good in life, till all personal interest in it is lost."

"Don't talk so, Maude; a fault seen is already half-conquered," replied Mrs Powys, soothingly; "it is not too late: begin the work you set yourself to do at once: whatever it is you know you ought to do, do it."

"You should be at my elbow always, my good genius, prompting me to right, warning me from indolence and wrong," said Maude, warmly.

"You would grow impatient of both prompting and warning! Ah Maude! I know you better than you know yourself: you will do your own way, whatever betide!" answered Mrs Powys.

Maude bowed her forehead down on her spread hands, and remained silent several mi-

nutes. When she raised her face, there were traces of tears on her cheeks. Mrs Powys kissed her tenderly.

"Oh mother! let me call you mother, that I may know there is some one to whom I may tell my weakness. Do we suffer less because our pride is stronger than our heart? Surely not. There is not a being in the world who can say me nay: yet when the hour comes, holding, as I do, the thread of happiness in my own hand, I shall sever it: I shall have a thousand arguments against my heart, and only one for it. Foredoomed—I am foredoomed!"

"Nonsense, Maude! there is no foredooming in the case," returned Mrs Powys, more sharply than she had before spoken, though she was deeply touched; "we do not believe in such things now-a-days: we know that we are the makers and marrers of our lot."

"The very word you use shews it is a hazard. 'Our lot' you say; blindly drawn, to be as blindly wrought out!" suddenly replied Maude.

"Then you will charge fate and chance with all your wrong doings. You will say,

'You have no voice in the matter; you must follow where they lead:' this is a dangerous creed of yours, Maude," said Mrs Powys, gravely.

"I think we are all creatures of circumstance; pushed to and fro, where it wills, with little or no force of our own to help or prevent," returned Maude.

"Then what becomes of Providence? Its mission in that case is ended. If chance governs the world, what is God?" asked Mrs Powys.

Maude was silent for some minutes.

"What is God?" she echoed: "the Maker, and Keeper, and Father of men."

"True!"

"Oh! I scarce know what to say!" exclaimed the girl, impetuously: I am not merely weak, but wicked. I sit and think, and think, until my brain is in a whirl! Lately, I have been reading some German books, and there the sovereign ruler is Chance; and it seemed all fair to my mind, which is getting warped, and sees things in other lights from what it did."

"Read no more of them child; read your

Bible instead," replied Mrs Powys. "Think, Maude, since we have to answer for our deeds, would it be just that Chance should direct our doings, and our God a just God?"

"Say no more! I see it all—all!" returned Maude: "it is no longer any use laying that flattering unction to my soul. I act at my own risk and peril: no Chance, no blind Fate in the matter. Oh! that I had my Lettice's simple faith!" And again the girl's head sank on her hands; and this time she wept aloud. No one, in that bowed figure, so humble and penitent, could have recognised the form that a few minutes after stood stately and erect, with convulsed but haughty face, in the deepening twilight of the summer evening.

"I blush for my weakness! for my folly! I blush that even you should have seen me, Mrs Powys!" she exclaimed.

"You called me 'Mother' a little while ago," said the old governess meekly, surprised and grieved at the sudden changes in Maude's manner.

"Let it pass!" returned Maude shortly; "I must go—my hour has been lengthened into

two. I will see you again. Why not come back to Houghton?"

"No!" said Mrs Powys.

"So be it: I cannot ask you to bear with my humours. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, and God bless you!" ejaculated Mrs Powys.

"Strange!" said the old lady to herself, when the great gates had closed after her visitor. "Strange! she was always changeable, but now she is not the same person five minutes together. Very strange!"

CHAPTER III.

THE BRIDGE.

MAUDE TALBOT leaned back in the carriage, as it drove through the narrow, devious streets towards the more open part of the town, with her hands pressed over her face. The uneasy motion of the vehicle, the noisy people in the way, the shouts and hoarse laughter of groups of men and women thronging the doorways of flaring taverns—nothing roused her. If she had looked out from the window, instead of being wrapped in her own feelings, she might have obtained a few glimpses of the life of the people, such as would not come under her ken in the broad day: glimpses which would have disgusted, whilst they took the scales of misrepresentation from her eyes.

But self was dominant in her heart that night.

She was however to be rudely roused from her reverie.

The streets through which they first went were built of very high houses, formerly tennanted by gentry, but since let off to families in rooms. These houses effectually shut out all extended view, but coming from these narrow and gloomy streets, upon a bridge which was the connecting link between the higher and lower parts of the town, the carriage was suddenly stopped. Maude lifted her head, and a fearful sight met her eyes. The sky was one lurid glow, and the air was filled with sparks.

Saunders came to the door of the carriage.

"A fire, my lady, at the Hardwicke factory," he said, opening it.

Maude got out like some one bewildered, and leant against the parapet of the bridge, looking over down the river. The surface was dotted with boats crowded with people, intent on beholding that most awful of sights, a great fire. The building presented a very extensive

front to the river, and through the multitudes of windows that pierced it, poured volleys of smoke and flame. Presently came thundering by, with horses urged to their fullest speed, fire-engines, followed almost immediately by a party of military, headed by a very young, dark-faced officer, who seemed to long to outride his men, so eager was he for the danger.

The wild excitement of the scene was new to Maude, and it paralysed her. The white faces of the people looking up from the river—the loud hoarse cries of men in the distance—the roar of the flames, and the falling of heavy parts of the building—all these were startling; but could she have been nearer the scene of destruction, her heart would have been sick within her. There were several people leaning over the parapet of the bridge near Maude. Two men talking together, she could not help overhearing.

"This is a sight for sair een," observed the elder of the two, a gaunt, half-starved looking individual, with a fierce haggard countenance.

"And for empty bellies, a wonderful good supper," returned his companion.

"The best many of us have had for a long while," said the first, angrily.

"It is no use going to help : I was a goodish help once; but I could not do much now : Ay, Jefferson, times go hard with us poor folk!"

"Harder with you, Frankish, than with me. I have work enough, and to spare; but as for the wages, they never was over plentiful at the Hardwicke, and it is not to be expected they'll be better now : there'll be some of us out to-morrow on the streets," replied Jefferson—old Mark's son it was.

"You have three to keep: I have only myself, and I starve," said Frankish. "Look at these hands: they have not done a regular day's work since March; just odd turns now and then—holding horses, and so on." As he spoke, he stretched out a pair of huge, skeleton-like hands, one of which touched Maude's shoulder. She turned towards him suddenly. The man drew off a few paces: that haughty face, white and excited as it looked, awed him. Jefferson had recognised her. She took her

purse from her pocket and offered the man a piece of gold.

"I'm not a beggar!" said Frankish, shortly.

"Go and work it out there!" replied Maude, pointing to the blazing building.

The two men spoke together earnestly; and then touching his cap to Maude, Frankish accepted the proffered gift, and disappeared down a narrow back street that led by a short cut, available only to foot-passengers, to the Hardwicke factory. Maude observed that his companion still kept his place, leaning over the bridge, at a short distance from her. Saunders came up and spoke to him.

"You have nothing to do down there then, and you look a likely man enough?" observed the servant.

Jefferson just glanced aside at him, and then turned his eyes again towards the blazing pile of buildings, where the fire was evidently gaining. Indeed, it had reached some outer sheds connected with the factory; and from thence had communicated with the old rotten houses, which were the dwellings of the chief part of the workpeople.

"God help the bairns, and old folk, and sick, in them houses there!" said Saunders, little heeding the contempt with which Jefferson had heard his first remark. Jefferson threw his hands up in the air, as if suddenly stricken with some fearful recollection, and then dashed down the lane which Frankish had previously taken.

"Surely that man has no one there waiting for him, and him standing here idle all this while!" ejaculated Saunders.

"It is Mark Jefferson's son," said Miss Talbot.

Saunders touched his hat, and asked his lady if she would not please to drive to the inn.

"No, Saunders, no!" she replied; "but send Thomas home: you will wait."

We will leave her, standing here and looking over the bridge as the night deepens, whilst we return to Old Court, and Mrs Powys.

It was light as day in the Oriel chamber. The old governess was standing in her window looking up at the lurid sky. The factory was not visible from it; but she had been up to

the roof with Martha, and seen a sight such as her eyes before had never beheld. Several of the humbler houses, as well as the Hardwicke Factory, were burning, and the inhabitants were thronging the streets in every direction. Many women and children had taken refuge within the court-yard of the hospital, but more were roaming frantically up and down, bewailing their losses, and impeding the efforts of the men by their outrageous sorrow. Friends and relatives were madly beseeching help for those unable to help themselves, forgotten till too late in those foul garrets of the old houses which were the last refuges of the destitute.

One figure Mrs Powys had seen standing in white-night clothes—a sick woman doubtless—balancing herself unsteadily on the parapet of a house, which was burning beneath her, stretching out her arms for aid, and then wavering, falling down from that giddy height into the streets below!

She could bear no more, her heart fainted; so Martha led her back to the Oriel room, and left her gazing with dim eyes at the glowing

sky, spangled with countless millions of falling sparks, ever and anon swept out by black smoke clouds volleying through the air.

At a corner house in view of, but untouched by the fire—probably because there the streets widened into a square, and also because the slight wind which rose after sunset inclined the flames in a contrary direction—a little huckster's shop it was, with three rooms over it, and a close kitchen behind—there was a group of people watching with intense fear and anxiety the progress of the terrible element. This group consisted of old Mark Jefferson, his two grandchildren, Mary Davy, the keeper of the shop, and one of her familiar gossips, Jane Groves.

The women stood outside the door with their arms folded in their aprons, indulging in dolorous prophecies concerning the amount of damage the Hardwicke would sustain, and taking that real though unexpressed pleasurable excitement in the misfortunes of others, in which human nature is apt to revel—impoverished human nature especially.

Mark Jefferson was resting on a chair, just

within the shop, for his limbs shook so that they refused to support him. Mrs Groves had just observed that his son would be helping at the fire, most like; she remembered of two men being killed at a fire when she was a girl: a remark that did more credit to her memory—for she must have been seventy—than to her thoughtfulness of other people's feelings.

Jessie Jefferson was on her knees by her grandfather, by turns crying and staring with affrighted eyes at the burning factory. Nell stood leaning against the door-post, quite calm, and earnestly wishing she were a man, that she might go and help: her sister's fright seemed to annoy her.

"Whisht, Jessie, whisht!" she said impatiently; "isn't it right father should be helping there. 'Deed, if 'twere our house on fire, wouldn't the neighbours come to us; and why should father be idle when there's such work to do?" Jessie was still; she stood in some awe of her elder sister's firmness and strength of character.

"Ay, Nell, lassie, it is an awful sight: I

never seed a fire afore, though I be past my fourscore years," said the old man.

"Didn't you, indeed, sir!" exclaimed Mrs Groves, coming in and propping her solid bulk against the counter: "I've seen a many in my time; one or more, every year a'most."

Mrs Groves *might* have explained that she made a point of attending at all such casualties when they occurred within a circuit of four miles; but she did *not:* she left Mark Jefferson to imagine that this was a district peculiarly subject to fires, where awful tragedies could be seen gratis by the curious, and an interesting locality on that account.

"Yes!" continued Mrs Groves, after a pause, to allow of the intended impression sinking into the minds of her audience; "yes! and most often two or three has been burnt and carried away to the hospital, and now and then people suffocated in the smoke. It always is the way in this town. It's my wonder more people doesn't perish: there's so many masters amongst a crowd: all on 'em ordering, and none on 'em doing. Then the town engines won't work, though one would think they have

practice enow: then comes the milingtary, and all goes on right, and the fire goes out in no time, as one may say. I have a great respect for the milingtary, being connected with them.''—The late Mr Groves had been in the militia, but had never been so happy as to be called out!

"Don't you go to frighten yourself, Mr Jefferson! there is no call for it!" said Mary Davy, cheerily, looking into the shop: "here is your son coming across the square, as hard as he can run, and none the worse for the work *he's* done, I'll be bound!"—

The younger Jefferson was no favourite of Mary Davy's: to use her own forcible expression—"she liked neither egg nor shell of him."

A few seconds after, Frank Jefferson entered the shop, breathless, wiping the perspiration from his face; he looked round hastily, and his glance comprehended the whole group. Nellie was beside him in a moment, asking twenty questions in a breath.

"Heaven be praised, all's safe here!" were his first words. "Ay, father, what's the mat-

ter now?" he continued, as Mark tried to rise, and fell back in his chair speechless.

"Poor dear! he can't bear up like us younger folk; he's fainted dead away!" exclaimed Jane Groves.

Mary Davy, like a good, kind soul as she was, busied herself immediately with restoratives, and Mark soon opened his eyes with an anxious, bewildered stare on the faces clustered about him.

"That's right: now let us get him off to his bed," said Mary. But the old man would not be removed; the fire exercised a terrible fascination over his feelings, and he resolved to see it out, as he said. His son tried to persuade him also.

"Nay, nay, I'll none to bed yet!" persisted Mark: "how could I rest with that lowe there flaring into t' chaumer? Let me be, all on ye! Jessie, bairn, doant cry so! Look at Nell! She's the brave lass, is Nell."

"Come away, father; you'll be ill t' morn," said the younger Jefferson.

"Nay, I'll be right weel, I reckon," was the reply.

"What can the auld man mean? he'll be right well the morn," whispered Mrs Groves, mysteriously behind her hand, to her crony Mary Davy.

"Oh! one can't fathom these queer country-folk's notions. One would think a fire would upset maist auld people; but he's a hale man of his age," said Mary.

"Why, do you know, I think it's a bad sign his perking up so just after a swound like yon. Mark my words, Mary Davy," continued Jane Groves; "our Ellen Maria did much the same afore she was took for death: just like a flare up i' the socket of a candle as it goes out!"

"Hush!" whispered Mary, perceiving that Jessie overheard them.

A clatter of a vehicle coming at full speed down the street called the two gossips out to their posts of observation in the square. As the cab whirled by, Jane Groves exclaimed that it contained Mr Simpson, the owner of the Hardwicke Factory, and Mr Wylie, Miss Talbot's agent. She also added, that Mr Simpson's face was flushed scarlet, and Mr Wylie was as white as a ghost. How she

made the observation in the rapid transit of the vehicle is a mystery; but Jane had a habit of amplifying her details, which will perhaps account for it.

Still the fire raged on for full two hours more, with no appearance of abating: it had indeed spread, though in an opposite direction from the huckster's shop. From time to time there came hurrying past women and children, burnt out, and going to seek a refuge in the Union Workhouse, or within the walls of Old Court; to which place Mr Wylie had directed them to go till something could be done for them.

Presently there came by a slow procession —a door carried by men—on which lay stretched the form of a man. The younger Jefferson went up to them, and they rested a minute with their burden.

"Dead?" asked he, shortly, of the foremost of the bearers.

"No; badly hurt," he replied laconically, as they moved on.

"Where are you going to take him? who is it?" asked Jane Groves.

"Don't know," said another of the men; "going to the Hospital."

"It's one Frankish: I knows him," observed a gaunt-looking lad who had followed them thus far. "I knows him, cos we've been on the streets together a precious long while, and he always gave me summut when he'd aught to give; which wasn't often, or he wouldn't ha' been there," pointing after the group.

"How wouldn't he ha' been there? that has nought to do wi' his being hurt at the fire, has it?" asked Jane sharply—liking the information, but not the informer.

"Why, you see," replied the lad, looking down at his own meagre limbs, "he was summut like me, and not over strong; and he went up into one o' them rookeries to see if there was ony folk left or forgotten: some said there was, and some said there wasn't; so he went, and the roof or summut fell in, and he got hurt, but they dragged him out alive; and that's all."

"Frankish! Frankish! I should know that name, son! who is he?" asked old Mark, who had been listening attentively to the story.

"He tell'd me he come frae Hillside," said the lad: "a fine country place! and for all he's got i' the toun, he'd a sight better have stayed there."

And with these words the poor lad shambled off to join the procession, not yet out of sight, to follow his friend to the Hospital; to sit on the steps all night, and pester doctors and nurses with questions as to how he is likely to be; to sit there, more or less, every day, for better than a week, and then to follow a pauper funeral to St Grim's churchyard crying bitterly; to be told by a compassionate doctor that it is all for the best; that Frankish suffered terribly while he lingered, and that could he have lived he would never again have set foot to the ground; to go away somewhat comforted, and to be lost again to sight in the wretched crowd of which he is an atom.

"Frae Hillside! ay, I mind him now!" said Mark Jefferson, musingly: "a bad man, a poacher — shot a gamekeeper once, was tried, and got off. Ay, a bad man! gone to his account to-night!"

"He's not dead, father; only badly hurt," explained his son.

"Sae much the better—sae much the better! few men have more need o' time to make their peace wi' God. There's blood on his hand, nae doubt on't! but sure *that* stain 's not so deep but the blood o' Christ can wash it out. A young man, too; not mair than forty years. A bad lad always—God forgie him!"

"Poachers are not all *bad* men! Why do the great folk preserve game? They've no right:—*they make a crime!* Havn't we as much right to the birds of heaven as they have? They feed on poor man's corn; and if he takes a bird, he steals. I say, we who suffer by the law should have a voice in the making o' the law. Rich men don't poach: rich men don't starve!" exclaimed the younger Jefferson.

"We hae nae right to break the law, such as it is, son! If it be not a just law, it won't last long. Naught bad is ever let triumph for ever," said the old man.

"But that law has destroyed mony a man who would hae died quiet in his bed but for it," observed Jane Groves decisively.

"It didn't make Frankish wicked: he was ready-made to its hand," replied the old man.

"Hillside made him; we know all of us what sort of a place that is: shame on them that leave it as it is!" said Frank Jefferson, bitterly.

"Poor country fellows get sent into the jails of great towns, and come to be hand and glove wi' all the raff and badness they find there: perhaps they shot a partridge, or snared a hare when food was short wi' 'em—as it too oft is; and they get a term in jail, and come out, as one may say, finished scoundrels, ready to shoot a man if he stand i' their way. Jail's a bad school for such like, and it's a mighty expensive eddication for the country to give her poor bairns," said Jane Groves, ironically.

Jefferson joined Mrs Groves in railing at the laws and their makers, in the bitter style usual to half-educated people of their class, till Mary Davy begged they would "whisht," for Mr Wylie and another gentleman were coming up the street.

The two gentlemen paused at the corner of the street opposite the shop, and turned their

faces towards the burning factory. They were talking earnestly together.

Jane Groves, not troubled with much delicacy of feeling where her curiosity was concerned, drew gradually nearer to them in the hope of overhearing their discourse; but Mr Wylie's eye caught her intent, and they moved on. As they passed the shop-door, his companion suddenly paused in amazement.

What! Jefferson! you here when your factory is blazing? why are you not at your post, sir? We might well ask for you while you are resting at your ease, and—— But I say no more: you'll hear of this to-morrow!" exclaimed the young gentleman.

He was a clerk in the employment of Mr Simpson.

"What! is that one of your men idling here at such a time?" demanded Mr Wylie.

Jefferson endeavoured to exculpate himself, and Mark tried to speak also; but the agent interrupted passionately.

"Do you know, sir, that this is no accident!" —pointing to the fire—"no accident at all! but

a malicious, and unhappily a successful plot: fire-balls, sir, were thrown into the waste-room, and there it originated: some one must have thrown them; and let me tell you, sir, your absence is a suspicious circumstance!"

"So help me God, I know nothing of the matter!" exclaimed Frank Jefferson, impetuously.

"You need not take an oath to me! you will be heard in another place!" said Mr Wylie, sneeringly.

The other touched him, and whispered something about escape, which caught the old man's ears.

"Nay, nay, gentlemen, my lad is neither coward nor liar: if he says he knows naught o' this bad deed, be sure he speaks true. You are hard on him, Mr Wylie: it was I and the bairns here kept him," said Mark, eagerly.

"Every body may not believe you, or him either, though he is here now: where was he four hours ago? that's the question! was he here then?" asked Wylie, sharply.

"Nay, he came in about two hours sin': where wert, lad? Speak, tell the gentlemen!"

said the old man, anxiously turning to his son. Young Jefferson hesitated.

"We won't press the question now: I have a tolerably accurate guess," returned Wylie, with a significant grin.

"I'm afraid your son knows more of those same fire-balls that were thrown into the waste-room of the Hardwicke Factory, four hours ago, than he will like to see proved. Good-night to you! We are not constables, or we would secure you at once; but don't run: it would only go harder with you."

"You bad man! you wicked, cruel man!" shrieked little Jessie, suddenly appearing before him, and stamping her foot passionately.

"Whisht, Jessie, whisht!" said Nellie, drawing her back, amazed at this outbreak of the usually quiet, little child.

Mr Wylie started, and laughed: his companion, a younger man, and rather handsome, bowed satirically.

"Well, now! you plead for your father, and he'll be sure to get off: he should, if I were judge, at least," said the clerk.

Jessie sprang forward to thank him; but her father caught her.

"Be quiet, bairn; you're daft to-night," he muttered: "it'll be something new when Frederick Linfoot does a good turn for any body but himself."

"That girl will be a beauty in four years' time, Wylie," remarked Mr Linfoot, as they slowly returned across the square.

"You can think of women and beauty on such a night as this: happy man! I can see nothing but this awful destruction of property," returned the agent.

"Your part is insured," observed Mr Linfoot.

"Every brick of it! How is it with your master?" asked Mr Wylie, softly.

"Not a penny; he'll be ruined, or nearly so," replied Linfoot.

"Well, the burning of these rookeries will be a good thing in the end," observed Wylie, after a pause.

"It is a sharp purgative, though," said the young clerk, shaking his head.

"Sharp diseases need sharp remedies," returned his companion.

"They are getting the fire under now!" exclaimed Mr Linfoot, as they came nearer to the factory. "Why, it seems to me that it has almost burnt itself out."

"Who is that young fellow who is so active amongst the workmen: that tall, long-limbed, laddish fellow?" said Mr Wylie, pointing to an individual without coat or cap, and plentifully begrimed with smoke, who was directing and aiding the efforts of a party of soldiers and workmen.

"That is an officer: his name is Gower—I heard somebody call him Gower; and a brave slip of a lad he is: only an ensign, I believe, though he seems to know his work so well—better than many an older fellow: there's good stuff in him!" said Linfoot.

The fire, by this time, was rapidly sinking. The four walls of the factory were all it had left; and these arrested its efforts, and stood up, gaunt and blackened, in the hot air, like a gigantic skeleton. The destructive element, which had spread amongst the houses on the river bank and through the narrow lanes with fright-

ful haste, seemed weary of its work of ruin; and about an hour after Mr Wylie's meeting with the Jeffersons at Mary Davy's shop-door, there was no light but the summer moon looking down placidly on the smoking relics, and on the huddled groups of houseless beings whom the fire had deprived of the wretched shelters they had dignified with the name of home.

The streets were almost deserted. A patrol of police had replaced the military, and Ensign Gower had cantered home at the head of his troop, with a burnt arm and singed hair, and a consciousness of having done his duty.

Mr Wylie had retreated to his comfortable bed, not altogether pleased with the increase of work this fire would give him. But he issued strict orders that he should not be disturbed till ten o'clock, and that every body who wanted to speak with him should be sent to his office, there to await his coming.

Mr Simpson went home a ruined man, with a ruined man's unpleasurable feelings,—made more particularly stinging by the reflection that there would be no sympathy for his misfortunes; for he had been a "hard man" to

his people, and a domineering tyrant amongst his workmen. He knew himself hated—and ruined by that hatred which his own doings had produced.

Not so much through carelessness as through presumptuous reliance on his own good fortune, he had neglected to effect insurances on the prodigious quantity of stock he possessed, in raw material, manufactured goods, and machinery; so that his loss had nothing to counterbalance it.

From an influential though unpopular citizen, he saw himself reduced by one stroke to a grade lower than his own clerks,—for they had character, and he had none but such a one as would sink him lower still. The sneers and shrewd comments he had overheard in the mob, had not soothed his irritated mind: they sent him to his home, vindictively resolved on prosecuting to the utmost those whom he suspected of having fired his mill.

Of the most disaffected amongst his workmen, Mr Simpson had been accustomed to keep a list, and the younger Jefferson stood high upon it, not only as a discontented man

himself, but a fosterer of discontent amongst his fellow-workers. His superiority of education, and a certain rude eloquence which he possessed, had enabled him to obtain a degree of ascendancy over these uncultured minds, which it is to be feared he had often used to their injury and his own.

He was a member of a Trade Union, and had been on several secret committees — a traitor in their own body had stated this privately to Mr Simpson,—whether he had been the agent in the destruction of the factory, he could not tell; but young Jefferson and three others were arrested on suspicion the day after the fire.

The fact of Jefferson not putting himself into concealment, or resisting his arrest, told well for him; particularly as suspicion being directed to him at once, and that suspicion broached by Mr Wylie in his presence, he would most naturally, if guilty, have tried to evade the consequences of the crime. He proved an alibi, successfully, and was acquitted; though not without a doubt remaining in the minds of many, that, if not the actual

thrower of the fire-balls into the waste-room of the factory, he had at least been one of the secret committee in which the plot of vengeance against their employer had been planned and matured. The real culprit was not discovered; and after the assizes, Mr Simpson withdrew from the town, to hide his diminished consequence in a strange place.

The Hardwicke factory was soon rebuilt, and new streets surrounded it, more open and airy than the previous ones, and unfortunately tenanted by a better class of people. What became of the poor wretches who had been burnt out, the direful crowding of such cheap tenements as still existed in plenty, could tell. Under a new lease-holder of more humane principles than Mr Simpson, there bade fair to be an improvement of the condition of the Hardwicke factory people, hitherto noted as the most riotous and turbulent of the disaffected mob.

Mr Wilson was a Scotchman—prudent and thrifty as his country-folk proverbially are, but untainted by the cruel greed of his predecessor. He was an unprejudiced man

too; and the fact of Jefferson having been *tried* for the arson, did not make Mr Wilson regard him as guilty. He saw Jefferson—gave him a patient hearing—believed his self-exculpation—advised him to beware of the radical principles which he held; and, finally, took him into his service. Jefferson was ready with his pen, as well as a skilful workman; and after the lapse of a few months, he found himself promoted to a seat in the clerk's office, with a good salary.

Mr Wilson liked Jefferson. Risen from the lower rank himself, he could sympathize with his ambition. The shrewd Scotchman recognized a spirit not altogether unlike his own in that of the country-bred demagogue.

A school and library were added to the Hardwicke factory, and matters began to look up in the world with the Jeffersons. The two little girls were placed in another school, and there began to be some chance of their growing up better than vain dawdling slatterns.

The old man, however, never recovered the shock of that terrible night, and the

anxiety in which he was kept for some weeks, as to the issue of his son's trial. Till that momentous event was over, he seemed filled with supernatural strength; but after the result was communicated to him, he sank into a state of apathy, from which nothing could arouse him.

He seemed to have forgotten more recent events, and to be straying perpetually amongst the scenes of his vanished youth. Those who sat by and overheard his maundering talk, caught the names of "young Cyrus Evelyn," and "Alice," and others equally strange to their ears: those perhaps of the play-fellows of his boyhood, or the sturdy friends of his mid-life. He always called Jessie "Alice," and could scarcely bear her out of his sight a moment. Nellie waited on him indefatigably; for her father was out all day, and Mary Davy could not be spared from the shop. But for Nell, Mark had little thought or care; it was for the gentle, easily-dispirited Jessie, he took most heed. Nell was the brave girl who would fight through the world well; but the other would sink under a little sorrow.

For a month, the old man remained in this semi-lethargic state, till one day he brisked up, and asked for his son.

"He's away, grandfather; but he'll be in bye-and-bye," said Nell, from her seat by the window, where she was busy knitting stockings for her father.

"Come here, Nell!" said Mark. Nell put aside her needles, and stood by him, shaking up the cushions of his chair—an office he required of her twenty times a day—whilst Jessie sat at his feet, turning over the leaves of a book.

"Let that be, Nell! I want to talk to thee!" said her grandfather. She would have knelt down by him to listen, as she often did; but he prevented her.

"No!" said he, solemnly; "thou must stand up, Nell, now and for ever by thyself, and thou must have a care over Jessie and thy father. Thou'lt be a woman soon, Nell: thou art main clever of thy age; and thou must be a watch over her; and oh, lass! be gentle wi' her: she wont bide threeping and crossing, like mony will: thou maun be a second mother

to her, and keep her out of harm's way; and aboun a', be kind to her!"

"Oh, grandfather! I surely will: my own little sister!" sobbed Nell.

"And thou, Jessie, be a good lass, and mind what Nell bids ye do; and never heed finery, which thou likes ower well already; and dinnot forget to pray God to keep thee out o' temptation; as he surely will, if ye ask Him. And ye'll bide together, and don't be hard on each other, if trouble comes. We've all need to bear and forbear, and its ill weeping alone, as sad hearts maun, if there is no mother or sister by. Now, kiss me, Jessie, and be a good bairn, so God 'll bless thee!"

For some time after Nellie resumed her knitting, she could scarcely see for the blinding tears: her grandfather was very dear to her, and she had been warned that he could not be expected to last long in his present state. She was thinking how lonely their house would seem in the great town without him; for her father was rarely at home till near bed-time—often not till long after they were asleep. Presently, however, she left her

work, and busied herself with preparations for their humble tea. Jessie was easily comforted, and laughed merrily to see her grandfather so much more lively than he had ever been since they left Staunton.

The evening passed rapidly, for Jane Groves came in and told all the news of the town, to which Jessie listened eagerly, while Nellie's needles clicked with a cheery, familiar sound in the pauses. The old man lay back and slept in his chair, and the two girls sat at the window with Jane Groves. They might have talked there for three quarters of an hour or more, when Nellie shivered, and started.

"What's the matter? surely you're not starved this warm night?" said Jane.

Nellie looked towards her grandfather, and then crossed the room.

"Oh! mercy on us, the auld man's swounded!" exclaimed Jane, following her: "la, I do think he's dead!—so he is," she added, in a lower tone, awed by the presence in which she stood.

The face of the old man was as calm as in

sleep; but the children felt that shrinking fear which the young have of death. Nellie was too much startled to shed tears yet, but Jessie's grief was loud and violent. Her sister drew her away into their bed-room; and sitting down on the bed-edge, she took her head on her bosom, and tried to comfort her for the loss of the best friend they ever had.

In the other room, several neighbours had collected, and Jane Groves was harrowing their feelings by telling how Mark Jefferson's spirit had swept by Nellie, making her shiver from head to foot. The entrance of Frank Jefferson put the troop of gossips to flight, and the room was cleared of all but Mary and the dead man's son.

Poor people do not pet their sorrows, and make much of them; so after Mark was buried at St Grim's, they ceased presently to speak of him. Some changes were made for the children: Jessie was apprenticed to a dressmaker in the better part of the town, where she lived in the house; but Nellie, who was her father's pride, remained at home; and for some time after his father's death, he did

strive not to leave the girl so much to herself. He brought her books from the library to read, and talked over his favourite theories with her, and the two understood each other; but Nellie missed her sister; and Jessie, amongst her fine new friends, longed often for Nell's cheery laugh and kind caress.

We have made a long digression from the main branch of our story to follow the fortunes of the Jeffersons; but we will leave them now for a few years, and return to the Lady of Houghton.

CHAPTER IV.

THE FALL OF THE LEAF.

THERE were merry doings at Houghton Priory during the latter days of summer. Maude Talbot collected around her a constant succession of visitors, and kept the old place alive. People said she was altered since her visit to London. They found her more stately and prouder—more ostentatiously hospitable, but less pleasantly so. It was not until the last week in October that the Priory returned to its old-fashioned stillness, which Lettice liked so much better than the gaieties which had preceded it. If there was any one who should have noticed a change in Maude, it was her sister. There were no more long rides in the Chase and through the wood;

no evening saunterings amongst the old alleys and flower-gardens; no twilight lingerings in the Oriel window: all was noisy, racketting, pleasure-seeking. Strange faces every week and every day, until the rooms allotted to Miriam Sedley were the only ones which afforded a secure retreat from the company. There Lettice and her governess lived in a kind of voluntary seclusion, receiving occasionally a visit from Cyrus Evelyn, and twice —from whom does the reader think?—from Lennox Gower, Letty's old play-fellow, a young officer now of very promising appearance.

Miriam Sedley looked on: her old days of dreaming were past. She was quiet; and if not happy, at least no longer sorrowing. Philip Warburton was in London. He was never named amongst them; and as the days passed by tranquilly, she grew reconciled to her inevitable life. People came and went whom Miriam cared nothing for. Lettice wished they would let her have Maude to herself a little more. And so the summer went by, and the Chase began to don its autumn tints of

red, and yellow, and brown, and the east winds blew sharply amongst the gables and chimneys, and the dead leaves went whirling and driving down the paths, and gave out a smell of decay as the foot crushed them.

It was the last week in October, and the visitors were all gone; and, to Letty's joy, no more were coming till Christmas.

The Manor House was open again, and the Warburtons were at home. They called when Maude was out riding with her sister, and the following day Maude returned the visit. "Sweet Annie Carey" was there, and the Lady of Houghton thus made her acquaintance. She had a winning gentleness of manner which attracted Maude. They were soon friends. Philip was absent.

Mrs Warburton's frigidity of behaviour towards Maude relaxed after their first meeting, and the two families exchanged frequent visits. Although Maude still retained her decision against Philip, she could not deny herself the pleasure of his society until, by a declaration, he should compel her to take one part or the other for ever. Philip Warburton seemed to

have some suspicion of this; and for a while he carefully avoided trenching on the dangerous ground, until he should have more certainty respecting her feelings—still an enigma to him. Thus they saw a great deal of each other: of one occasion in particular it is my intention to speak.

It was one morning in the beginning of November, bright but cold. Maude had begged the Warburtons and Miss Carey to stay at Houghton for a few days; and this was the last of them. During the week they had had many pleasant rides and walks together, both on the Manor property and through the romantic scenes of Houghton Chase.

On this morning Maude and Philip had strolled out with no other companion but Lupa. They took their way down an avenue of hoary beech trees, the fallen leaves of which made a thick carpet under foot. Maude felt that a crisis was at hand; but she was calm, though paler than usual.

"My mother will miss Annie Carey sadly," observed Philip, after they had walked for a

few moments in silence, when the commonplace topic of the weather was exhausted.

"Is she going to leave Houghton, then?" asked Maude in some surprise; for, though daily in familiar conversation with Miss Carey, such a step had never been hinted at by her.

"Surely you have not become so intimate without sharing each other's secrets: I thought all women made confidantes," said Philip.

"You misjudge us greatly: there are things women never tell," replied Maude.

"Then she has supposed that her long engagement is a matter of such notoriety as not to have needed naming. I should not call it an engagement, but an attachment; for the engagement was broken off years ago, and only renewed since the death of the Duke of Netherby: but now the marriage will be hastened, and will probably take place directly after Christmas; so my mother will lose her dear companion of the last ten years."

Maude had acquired the art of concealing her emotions; and glad was she that she had done so: to have been trifled with—mocked—

cast off!—it stung her to the quick. A few seconds' silence, and she spoke again.

"Mrs Warburton will feel her loss deeply," was all she said; but the tone struck Philip as strange. He did not suspect anything, however: it had long since passed out of his mind to reckon the Marquis of Salford amongst his rivals.

"Yes, she will, indeed," he added slowly. Then, speaking with passionate earnestness, he continued—"There is but one can brighten our home again. Oh, Maude! hear me! it is you! I have loved you—you know how I have loved you!"——

"Stop, Mr Warburton," said Maude, turning deadly pale; "say no more: oh! would to Heaven you had left that little unsaid!"—and she clasped her hands tightly over her heart, which throbbed as if it would burst its bonds.

Philip Warburton would have spoken, but she prevented him.

"Go away now: see me this afternoon before you leave Houghton: you shall have my decision then. Go, leave me: this is too much at once!"

For more than an hour Maude Talbot walked up and down that long beech avenue, too much agitated to think steadily yet, but growing calmer. As the carriage containing Mrs Warburton and Miss Carey drove past her, Maude made her adieux; for Mrs Warburton wished to return to the Manor in the early part of the day. When they were out of sight, Maude went into the house; and, avoiding the more frequented apartments, passed into the picture gallery.

She paced it up and down, backwards and forwards, her arms crossed over her bosom, and her face settling rapidly into a hard determination.

"The best blood of the land!"—so ran her thoughts—"the best blood of the land! statesmen, soldiers, priests, courtly ladies, and proud dames: no admixture of churlish blood with theirs! The best blood in the land! pure and undefiled through centuries. Merged in one branch, should all these long-accumulated honours be grafted on a new tree? be overshadowed by its spreading branches—lost—

forgotten—sneered at, perhaps, as a fashion for which the Times are out of tune?"

Who cares for buried heroes when there is strife at the gate? who looks back on learned casuist or princely priest, when the people's cry is ever—"Bread! bread! or we perish?"

Howards, Percies, Dudleys! No prouder name than yours, Maude, through the length and breadth of the land! Be firm: be great. Shall your girl's heart turn traitor to its blood? The best blood in the land! remember that!

Look out through the lofty window! there, by the western turret!

Who planted that giant oak, majestic in its venerable decay? An ancestor, who fought and fell at Hastings! Fighting for the Conqueror? Oh, no! for the old Saxon race, of whose best blood his was still the best.

There is a legend of that oak,—of the valiant old Crusader's daughter, who lies in the chancel of Houghton Church: a maiden whose heart was won by one of her father's esquires. Well, did she wed him? No! she could die; but she could not be false to her

race! Be like her, Maude! be proud, and die rather than yield!

What! shall your own heart master you? *You*, the representative of those who never lived to tell of defeat? Loyal to their God, their King, their principles,—from first to last!

Look this union in the face, Maude Talbot! Is it fitting that you should mate with one who, in the days of Hastings, had ranked as serf? Is it fitting, I say? A man of yesterday—a mere man of yesterday! Oh, Maude Talbot! why hearken thus to the mutterings of your evil genius?

If he could count back his descent to the flood, would it make him other than he is?

He has not even the plea of great wealth! You are not mercenary, Maude: but that would be an answer to the cavillings of the world; for gold will build a bridge over a wide gap, we know. Enough of this, Maude! enough of this! Your head is answered, if your heart must rest unsatisfied for ever! Go, and do as that Saxon maiden did: be true to

your race, and die! Oh, no! we do not die for love now-a-days; we are made of sterner stuff! Indeed, I think women's hearts are still much the same as in those ancient times, when poor, proud Rachel—who died in the way to Ephraph—found the divided love of her husband too little for its longings, and murmured against her fate, envying her sister the children God had bestowed on the unloved wife!

Can you, Maude, nurse these children of your pride, these prejudices of your people, and deny your heart? Decide—and quickly! There is yet time!

Is the struggle hard? is it passing bitter? Sit down awhile, and think again, in the winter sunshine, pouring through the high window! Maude! your gaze is on the oak tree! your lip is hardening! It is past! Go, now: wait till he comes: give him his answer, and ——

She walked slowly into the drawing-room, and sat down by the fire. Lettice was crouched in a deep chair, reading; but, as soon as her sister appeared, she threw the book down

on the table, and came and knelt beside her. Maude stooped down and kissed her, saying—

"Go away, Lettice, to Miss Sedley: I want to be alone for an hour or two. Go, my pet!"

The little girl looked surprised; but re-possessing herself of her book, she immediately left the room, greatly wondering what had come over Maude.

Alone there, in that stately room, unable to read, the minutes wore wearily away. Her mind was made up; she longed now for the deed to be done—for the temptation to be put away out of reach. The painful waiting was over at last. The door opened, and Philip Warburton came in—the privileged Lupa at his heels. Maude half rose, and then sank down in her chair, her cheek white as her bosom, and her lip quivering, spite of her self-command.

Lupa came as usual to be caressed, but Maude did not notice him,—not even when he rested his head on her lap, and looked up in her face with a beseeching, reproachful gaze. Philip observed it, and augured ill from

that small slight to his dog. There was no maidenly timidity in the averted face—only rebellious passion, haughtily repressed. Neither spoke for the first few seconds, but Maude broke the silence at last, and told him her decision in a clear, singularly steady voice.

The blood rushed to Philip Warburton's brow: he had hardly feared this.

"I see my presumption too late," he said, sadly.

"Oh no! do not call it that, Mr Warburton!" she exclaimed eagerly, stretching out her hand to detain him; for as he spoke, he had drawn back from the place where she sat: "Do not call it presumption—I am not worthy of you!"

There was some scorn in Philip Warburton's face as he listened to this disclaimer. Though you should kneel to him, Maude Talbot, he could not give you back the place you held in his heart five minutes ago! But he will not reproach you, Maude! You have drawn him on—flattered and tortured him by turns—and at last, wounded his pride by setting his living love in competition with the dusty honours of a host of dead ancestors, and rejecting him for

them. But there is a nobler feeling in his heart than pride.

"You have judged and decided for yourself, Maude Talbot: any other reason I could combat, but I fight not against shadows," said Philip Warburton, his countenance growing dark, as his eyes fixed themselves mournfully on her face.

"We may be friends still!" returned Maude, her cheek flushing warmly.

"Maude, the woman I have loved as I have loved you, can fill no place in my heart but that of love. You have not the courage to go through the world with me as wife; and I have not the courage—or rather, I will not so tempt my peace—as to have you for a friend!" replied Philip, rising.

"Do not let us part thus. Oh! if you knew all my heart!" exclaimed Maude.

"I do—I see it now. I see you love me better than any one on God's earth, whilst you are sending me from you. I see that those misty chains of prejudice are more powerful than my devotion, and I give you up—not bitterly, Maude—not resentfully; but still I give

you up, without an effort to alter your decision.

His grasp on her hand tightened as he spoke. She made no reply; and in another moment she was alone.

It was all over. He was gone. Maude stood leaning against the window, with her forehead resting on her hand, her eyes dim, spite of her pride—dim with tears. A few minutes since he was there beside her: her hand still felt the agonized pressure of his. His fate was in her power, and she had sealed it with a word—driven him from her—and with him her own peace of mind for evermore.

Did she repent? Not yet. Repentance is the work of a later and a calmer hour. Her heart still beat with the excitement of the struggle—the ashes were glowing though the flame of joy was out: it is in the black desolation of the dust that repentance comes —not in the first stunned, gasping bitterness of scarce-comprehended misery. Presently she sat down in her accustomed seat by the fire. Except a slight, a very slight contraction of the brow, there was no visible sign of the

change that had taken place within her. Well, if she must suffer, it should be silently. What right had she to complain of the cup of her own mixing? Surely none.

When Maude Talbot asked herself that question, she had begun to taste how bitter the draught was; but in the pride of her mistaken heart, she would not put it from her. No, she would analyze it—linger over it—drain it slowly to the dregs, so that not one drop should escape her lips: she would understand her misery—revel in it—perchance overcome it! The sacrifice demanded its completion.

Oh Maude! Maude! as the dim evening closes in, and the fire burns up higher and brighter, and the old room glows in the warm light, why is it that its desolate emptiness scares even you? What are you listening for?

For Philip's step? For Lupa's bark? Ay, think Maude, where are they?

Is it dreary?—is it quiet as death? Look round you—what is wanting—what?

The light of love, which shall come there never again—never again!

You have done as a woman who has a proper respect for her position should do: you have asserted your dignity—you have defined the limits between the aristocracy of birth and the aristocracy of merit—you have deferred to the opinion of the world. Take that to your heart and be comforted!

It is of no manner of consequence that you have outraged your own feelings—that you have embittered the best years of a very noble life: society demands such sacrifices—insatiable society!

Was it well done, Maude?—was it? to cast away that honest, manly devotion? Come, tell us which of your many friends can appreciate this deed which you have done? Who will praise, for whose praise you care one whit? Who could scorn or blame whose sarcasm could sting? Not one—on either side not one!

Look out through the future. Who is there of those dainty summer friends will stand by you as he would have done?

Oh Maude! Maude! I fear much there will be many and many a time when you will look back on this day's work with a sore, sad heart, as you take your journey alone through the world!

CHAPTER V.

A MOTHER'S TROUBLES.

"My son!"

"Well, mother, you were right! my infatuation, my folly, have met with the return your heart prophesied for them long ago: though you were silent before me, I felt that you had read my passion, and knew where it would end."

"My dear son!"——

"It's all over! Let us shut up that page of my life, and never let it be mentioned between us after this night! Never ask me how it was, or why! Spare me this autumn, —this coming winter. I cannot yet remain so near her,—I will go to Italy!"

"My poor son!" The mother's tears were

coursing rapidly down her cheeks. She seemed twenty times more stricken than Philip. He had nerved himself to meet her, to tell her of his rejection; and he did it without any display of passion or grief. The sorrow of a strong man is rarely loud-voiced or violent: the sorrow of such a man as Philip Warburton mostly abides a secret in his own breast. But the mother's keen-eyed affection was not deceived. She forebore to weary his already jaded spirit with well-meaning compassion, or to try to raise it by bitterly inveighing against the cause of his trouble. She only shewed him the wealth of her own inexhaustible mother-love, by yielding at once to his plea for absence, knowing what a great sacrifice that was for her.

"Go! Philip, go!—but, remember, I have only you left!"

"We have but each other henceforth, mother!"

There was no ill-timed mention of better days laid up in future, from Mrs Warburton's lips: she only stooped down and kissed her son's brow, parting from it the rich brown

curls; and then, with a silent pressure of the hand, she left him to his own thoughts.

And those thoughts—what were they? Philip Warburton was not the man to cherish a sentimental grief. True, he had hazarded his happiness on the caprice of a woman; but his energy of character, his intellect, his power of doing good, were left him: they were not wrecked.

There were a few days, certainly, during which his servant thought him afflicted with a strange absence of manner; and this sudden scheme of a journey to Italy caused astonishment: but further than that, no surmise went. That his master was a rejected lover, his man never suspected, and would not have believed had he been told so; for he looked on him as the best and wisest gentleman on the face of the earth, and the last man to fail in winning woman's favour.

Philip Warburton did not neglect any necessary preparations for his journey. He visited Dr Temple; saw his lawyer and steward on business; gave directions and plans for certain things to be done during his

absence; paid several farewell visits; and then left the Manor one morning, in his travelling carriage, with his man-servant, without anything extraordinary being thought of his proceedings, or the facts of the case having oozed out. This was just as it ought to be:—no scandal, no whispers, for future mortification for either side.

There are some people who think there is no real suffering without great external symbols,—tears, illness, mourning, feeble lamentations, wearisome drivellings. For my part, I think the deepest wounds are always the most carefully shrouded. Deaths come in the ordinary course of nature: there is a blank at the fireside—a voice the less in the morning and evening prayer; but the household economy goes on undisturbed, and all the world dines. There are worldly mischances on which the bearer must put a bold face, or sink. There are stings to our love, our vanity—and such, I reckon, amongst the keenest of our griefs—which must be glossed over. We must take our accustomed place, play our part, or be laughed at. Men, and women too, more

often than most of us think, act the hypocrite to escape being laughed at. Philip Warburton did; Maude Talbot did; Miriam Sedley did.

Blame them, all you who blazon your troubles to every indifferent eye, and take pity and ridicule together as a healing tribute for your griefs!

Somebody says, wiser than you or I, "The heart knoweth its own bitterness;" and hideth it wisely often.

Philip gone, the daily routine at the Manor resumed its ordinary course. Mrs Warburton and Annie Carey drove out as usual; there were the customary select dinner parties, the round of morning calls. There was the Duke of Netherby for a week, and Lady Riversdale for a few days; the preparations for Miss Carey's marriage were discussed by indifferent parties; and stately dowagers, with daughters, beautiful and *young*, came, and saw, and wondered, and went away and said it was the most *extraordinary* thing they had met with in the whole course of their experience, that the Duke of Netherby should ally himself

with a third-rate family—with a woman without a penny, and actually old enough to be his grandmother—when he might have commanded rank, beauty, youth, and wealth, if he had so wished! But these dowagers of unblemished descent were deferential in the extreme to the future duchess, though many a time it had pleased them to ignore her presence as Annie Carey.

In his home, Philip Warburton was missed most by his mother: indeed, it was natural, for in him were bound up all her proud hopes and all her tender affections. Few men have more respectful admiration for their mother than he had. As a boy, he had loved and reverenced her for her gentleness and care; as a man, he reverenced and respected in her a mind and heart superior to those of most women.

In him, she had had a son always dutiful—always kind: the only child left her. About him she had woven an airy fabric of ambitious fancies. He was to be the soul of honour—the pink of courtesy: and such her careful training had made him. But he was to

be more than this. He must be good, and great as well: men must praise his doings: he must rank high amongst the learned of his time: he must become the founder of a new race—noble by noble acts, and honoured amongst honourable men.

How many of her proud hopes went down in dust, that night after her son's return from Houghton, it would be hard to say; but many died to be revivified no more.

She did not fear that he would abandon his active life for one of unmanly regret; but she did fear lest the energy and aim of his existence should be lost, and so he should sink into retirement and grow old—the quiet country gentleman—living beloved, but dying inglorious.

Women such as Mrs Warburton, unambitious for themselves, are often greatly so for their children; and this idea of Philip—her noble, talented Philip!—becoming no more than any of the thousand petty strugglers in the vortex of public life, was perhaps more galling to her feelings than his rejection by Maude Talbot.

Here, however, Mrs Warburton mistook her son's character. The overthrowal of his love did not involve in its ruin his own devices for becoming a man great in his generation. Perhaps, indeed, that very circumstance contributed to centre his mind on his political existence, and to remove what might have proved a bar to his rise. He had now no rival in his thoughts—no carking cares to intrude between him and his ambition : he could not be a man blessed in the love of the woman of his choice; but he might be a man blessed by the voice of the people.

There might, under his steady working of his way upwards through all obstacles, lurk a latent desire to shew Maude how worthy of her he could have been. She should not have it in her power to despise him personally—unworthy of her alliance as she had deemed him by his birth.

This was no unworthy motive, if Philip had not had that higher one of benefitting the classes for which he laboured. If we could read all men's hearts, we should often be surprised what very trifling motives are

the springs of notable deeds—more trifling ones much than that which guided Philip Warburton through the mazes of political life into a great public position, and made his name a Household Word.

CHAPTER VI.

A MERRY CHRISTMAS AT HOUGHTON PRIORY.

"MAUDE! Sister Maude! don't you hear the Christmas bells? Maude, Maude!" exclaimed Lettice Talbot, rushing to her sister's room as soon as she was released from the hands of her nurse. The curtains of the bed were still closed; and Lettice fearing that her sister had not slept during the night, and so was slumbering now, crept up softly, and opening the drapery the "least bit in the world," peeped in. Maude turned her face and smiled, evidently awakened by the child's noise.

"Morning already!" she said, languidly.

"Yes; and such a morning for Christmas day!" replied Lettice.

"Look out of the window and tell me what you see: I am too lazily inclined to get up yet: you must be my eyes for once," said Maude.

"Well then, there is deep snow on the ground"—began the child.

"Deep snow!" echoed Maude, dreamily.

"Yes, as deep as it was last Christmas, when Mr Warburton helped the boys at Eversleigh to make a great man, and when they had a battle with snow-balls—do you remember?"

"Yes, I remember: what more?"

"Over the chase there is one white sheet, with no mark on it of any step; but there will be some presently, for there is Geoffry the gamekeeper, striding across from his cottage to Parker's lodge with four dogs: then the wood is black, and the trees in the chase are laden with snow instead of leaves. And I can see Peggy Bilton's red cloak tottering along the road: she will be in good time for church—in better time than you, sister Maude, unless you get up directly! And there is the smoke curling up from the cottage chimneys, and the spire overlooking them all; and the

river, winding away between the hills. And I can—yes, I am sure I can—see the white corner of the Manor House. Oh! how tiresome of Mr Warburton to go away for Christmas! Don't you wish he were back, Maude? I do."

Maude's head was on her pillow: perhaps she did not hear what Lettice said; at all events, she did not answer. The child went on.

"And now, there is Mr Gower going down to the second terrace; and there are some men sweeping the snow from the steps and the gravel walks: now there is Sir James Clare, with his hands behind him, looking very frosty-faced indeed, and Lady Whimper's son trotting beside him, and a number of other men: they have all turned back now, and are coming in to breakfast. There's the gong! Saunders never strikes it, except on Sunday morning: I wonder if he considers it more respectable for Christmas day also. There! oh, Maude! I wish you could have seen that! It was that funny little Lord Linnet: he skipped out of the breakfast-room window into the snow—they have not swept there yet—and without his hat; and then came Lady Juliet, and pulled

him in like a naughty boy. Oh, sister! why did she marry him?—she seems to despise him so."

"Hush, Lettice! what nonsense you are talking. Lady Juliet made a very proper marriage."

"How I do hate and detest every thing that is proper in that way. I never will—nothing shall make me marry any body I don't love,—not if it be twenty times proper that I should!" exclaimed Lettice, laughing.

"Make no rash vows, sister mine," returned her elder sister, gently.

"But, Maude, it is wicked to marry for money and titles," persisted Lettice.

"My dear, darling, unsophisticated Lettice, ring the bell for Aimée," said Maude.

"You would not do it, would you?" asked the child, sitting down on the side of the bed with one arm round her sister's neck, and her cold rosy cheek pressed against Maude's feverish one.

"Set your little heart at rest, Letty! I shall never leave you for any name or any rank borne by mortal man!" replied the elder, softly.

"Bless you for those words, Maude! I was afraid once—a little bit afraid—that Mr Warburton would take you away; but he won't, now you say that. Oh! how happy you have made me feel," said Lettice, kissing her.

"Go, foolish Lettice! go! here is Aimée: you know she does not like your surveillance; and Miss Sedley will want you—run away!" and with another kiss, and a strong pressure to her heart, Lettice released Maude from her arms, and went off to the school-room.

Aimée has her own way now, and her fair mistress is *coiffée en Grecque*. Yet it cannot be altogether the absence of the floods of golden brown ringlets which has so changed her beautiful face. Not that it is less beautiful by any means: but it is no longer a girl's face. People do not exclaim now, What a lovely girl! They have changed the note, and say, What an exquisite woman! She is much paler, graver; her face, if I may be permitted the expression, is a face in shadow; it has more thought, and more character, with less light. Lettice calls her brighter than ever;

but her eyes do not discern yet far below the surface.

Aimée knows better than any body else that her lady is changed. The soubrette reigns paramount over her toilette, and Maude never interferes—rarely speaks. Instead of facing the tall mirror, she sits before the window, watching the fleecy clouds floating across the sky, and the icicles hanging from the trees glittering in the morning sun. She has forgotten her beauty; she has forgotten all but the Christmas morning of last year, when the snow lay white on the ground as it lies now, and the red holly berries shone like rubies amongst the dark glossy leaves; and who cut a branch of the evergreen and gave it to her, with the wish that her happiness might wear all the year round, and all the years of a long life, and all the undying years of eternity, bright as the winter holly.

Aimée, as she winds the long tresses round her mistress' head, is very quiet and perfectly silent. She has begun to understand her moods; and when the hair is dressed, she

stands by till Maude rouses herself out of her reverie, and asks if those are Staunton bells that sound faintly in the distance. Aimée says, she thinks they are—though she knows quite well that they are not: they are the bells at the new church Mr Warburton has built at one of the outlying hamlets over the hills; they are sweet toned, and Maude says so. As she speaks, the bells of Houghton church peal out and drown the sound, and Maude hurries through her toilette, and drinks a cup of coffee in her dressing-room, and shrouds herself in a heavy cloak, and follows her visitors to church on foot, with Lettice beside her.

Maude Talbot has begun to think little of the weather: a sure sign, Aimée says, that she cares nothing for her beauty; or how would she go out on foot such a morning, with carriages at command, and without a veil, in such a bitter frost.

As Maude and her sister go rapidly down the swept walk across the Chase, they see two carriages returning after depositing their loads at the church gate; the bells are chiming, and though they hurry, the prayers are begun

when they enter. Lady Linnet, in bridal brilliance, Lady Clare, with her two unmarried daughters, and Lady Whimper and her son, and Lord Linnet, are there, worshipping, and calling themselves "miserable sinners," with countenances expressive of the greatest satisfaction.

The Lady of Houghton stands, and kneels, and sits at the proper times,—she even bends her knee at the name of Christ, but not a word does she hear either of prayer or thanksgiving. Her demeanour is grave and dignified—very exemplary—as Lady Clare says; but whether it be right in the sight of God, she cannot know. But Lettice and Miriam Sedley pray for Maude, and Maude thinks of travellers in strange lands on Christmas day, and wonders if one of those travellers is, like her, wandering in spirit in the past year, and thinking of the dreams that vanished with the autumn suns a little while ago.

Then Lord Linnet drops his book, which he has been holding wrong side up for some time, and startles her from her reflections, and is himself covered with confusion by a

reproachful glance launched at him by his lady wife, when young Whimper treads on his toes surreptitiously and makes him titter.

Lady Whimper removes her gold eye-glass to see what is the matter : does not see it, and asks Lady Clare, who is beside her, if somebody is ill ? receives a satisfactory reply, and relapses into the dose which the fall of the prayer-book interrupted.

Then Lettice espies Mr Gower in a distant part of the church, amongst the old women, he having come in late; and she nods to him, and is checked by Sara Clare, who has her at her left hand, and keeps a sharp eye on her. Then, the people all stand up, and the Christmas hymn is sung; and Lettice distinguishes Mr Gower's voice, and would have received another pull from Sara Clare, only she recollected herself in time, and kept her eyes on the book.

Then, there was a long sermon from Mr Grandiose, who was staying at Houghton,— a long, and, moreover, a good sermon; but in its matter infinitely more applicable to

the reverend divine himself than to any individual amongst his audience, insomuch that he spake therein of the neglect of duty, lukewarmness in religion, eager pursuit of earthly pomp, and a forgetfulness of God. Yet the Reverend Theodore Grandiose stood in his pulpit, without one qualm of conscience, preaching to others what his own example boldly defied. He was a majestic-looking man of nearly sixty, his forehead bald, and his few remaining locks silvery white. His countenance had a benevolent expression, and his language a fervour to which few there were accustomed. His auditors might have greatly profited thereby, if they had not, most of them, been intimately acquainted with Staunton and Hillside, and with the fact, that Theodore Grandiose, who stood there, a minister of God, uttering His word to his own condemnation, left the people committed to his guidance, to an ill-paid and neglectful curate. Instead, therefore, of taking his powerful words into their hearts, and profiting by them, the more shrewd amongst his hearers remarked to each other, as they left

the church-porch, that the parson might take it home himself, and amend his doings.

Lady Whimper observed to Lady Clare, as they drove back to the Priory, that it was an admirable discourse; and that she wondered the Reverend Theodore did not establish himself in London—there was such a wide field for the display of his eloquence: she was sure he would become a popular preacher, he was such a splendid old man.

Young Gower thought what a fine general he would have made, and gave him credit for all he seemed, praising him to Lettice, whom he joined in the walk back across the Chase.

And Mr Grandiose hugged himself in the idea of the impression that his favourite sermon, composed when he was a younger and less indolent man, must have made on the mind of the Lady of Houghton; and wondered if it were possible she might be induced to bestow Houghton living on him, as well as that he already held, when the present incumbent, who was very old, died.

And Maude, with her arms folded in her

long heavy cloak, walked silently home, continuing the reverie, which neither the prayers nor the eloquent sermon had in the smallest degree disturbed.

But at luncheon she came out of herself, and talked and laughed with the merriest; and, during the long afternoon, the whole party assembled in the library, and there amused themselves as fancy directed.

Lord and Lady Linnet sat apart in a cosy nook, Lord Linnet looking not unlike a schoolboy *en penitence:* Lady Whimper's son observed, facetiously, to Ada Clare, to whom he had devoted himself, that he was sure he was receiving condign punishment for his bad behaviour in church.

Mr Grandiose talked antiquity and archæology to Mr Evelyn, "in a way to make one's head ache," said the same lordling; and a select group, consisting of Maude, Lettice, Gower, and a fellow-officer of his who had been in India, encircled one of the fires, and listened to stories of hair-breadth escapes by field and flood, recounted with much energy, and no little romance, by the travelled hero.

"Captain Somerset, do you know any ghost-stories—real good ghost-stories—to make us shiver?" suddenly asked Lettice, at the conclusion of one of the soldier's most improbable histories.

"Hundreds, thousands, my fair friend!" replied Captain Somerset, twirling his grizzled moustache, and looking horrors at the name of ghosts.

"Oh! do tell us some—do!" cried three or four voices.

"Not now, not now—in broad day-light: why, you would laugh to scorn the most ghastly spectre that ever grinned through a chink in the door, if I told it now!" remonstrated Captain Somerset.

"In the twilight, then: yes, before dinner," persisted Lettice.

"Not so: after tea, in the drawing-room, with half the wax-lights put out; when the wind has risen, and goes calling round the house as if it had lost its mates: its moanings will fill in the pauses of the tale, and you will acknowledge that that is the proper atmosphere for a ghost-story."

"I shall be gone to bed," said Lettice, dolorously.

"Nonsense! we must have you amongst us, or no ghost-story, for you originated the idea," replied the Captain, stoutly.

Lettice was rejoiced by the assurance that she really should sit up to hear Captain Somerset's ghost-story, on condition that she should conquer her fears afterwards, and go bravely to sleep in the dark, as usual. Lettice said she was sure she should not care: she was not so timid as she used to be by far; and she appealed to Mr Gower to support her assertion. This he immediately did with great decision, though he believed in his heart that she was the veriest coward in the world, and loved her for it; nevertheless, he was ready to second all she said.

In return for this upholding of her character, Mr Gower preferred a request that Lettice might be his companion in a brisk walk up and down the avenue or the terraces; a request which was granted, after some demur from Maude. Then, shrouded to the very nose, and holding fast by Mr Gower's

hand, the little damsel tripped up and down, chattering and laughing incessantly, and making huge devastation in that great boy's heart. He was no more than a boy yet, though he did wear the King's uniform: indeed, he confided to Lettice, as an inestimable secret, that he was nineteen last birth-day, and she told him, in return, that she was nearly twelve!

Then, they talked about dogs, and be sure Lupa and his master were not forgotten; and Gower said, he thought he had a dog at home would soon rival Lupa in her affections.

"What was his name?"

"His name was Rouser."

"What colour was he?"

"Black, to be sure."

"And curly?"

"Oh, yes! very curly."

"And good tempered?"

"The very best fellow in the world."

Lettice wished she could see him: she liked great, big, rough dogs so very much better than snappish little Fiddies.

"He should be sent for next day—he was

only at the barracks; his groom would fetch him."

At this point of the conversation, Captain Somerset joined them. He seized Lettice's other hand, and she trotted along between them, quite at her ease. The little girl regarded them probably as the "nice rough-dog" style of men, for she liked them. No amount of intimacy could have led her to walk hand-in-hand with the Lords Linnet and Whimper—the snappish Fiddies of humanity; and they, fine soldierly fellows, thought, both of them, that the soft, fair, delicate Lettice was far more loveable, if less lovely, than her majestic sister.

Young Gower, indeed, stood in some awe of the proud beauty, whilst the tender Letty had won her way into his very heart of hearts. And that pure love for a child, was an armour of proof to him against the coarse temptations of the world into which he was thrown, —one of the chief causes that his promise in youth was so amply fulfilled, by a brave, truthful, and most honourable maturity. He had been carefully educated, and the good

principles sown in his mind fell on a naturally good soil. Firm and energetic in character, yet courteous and gentle in manner, Gower was always a favourite, and often an idol. Though not handsome exactly, his countenance was fine and open. He had a broad forehead, clear hazel eyes, a high, thin-nostrilled nose, and a dark olive complexion, with hair almost as black and as curly as his dog Rouser's; his figure considerably above the common height, was as yet scarcely developed in its full muscular strength, and his erect carriage was perhaps almost too military. Such was Gower at the period of his Christmas visit to Houghton Priory.

Captain Somerset was the very type and model of the man who has seen hard service. What his complexion had originally been, it would be difficult to say, for at this period it was of the darkest tint to which the fair skin of the Northerns can be dyed by a long residence in hot climates. His moustache was grey, and his hair the same ; his eyebrows were heavy and dark, as were his wonderfully penetrating eyes. His form was spare,

but very tall and upright; and a certain way he had of carrying his head gave him an air of command and resolution, which marked him at once as one who had dared and led to danger —a fact to which a sabre cut across the temple, and the empty left sleeve of his coat, bore ample evidence.

Between these two, the slight, flexible form of Lettice Talbot moved rapidly up and down the terraces, which led by three descents into the Chase.

Looking out at them, from the window of her room in a retired part of the mansion, sat Miriam Sedley. She was thinking what might be the future of those two happy young creatures, and likening them, by some inexplicable freak of imagination, to herself and the Philip Warburton of long ago. Then, all outer objects vanished from her eyes, as sitting down in the embrasure of the window, she turned back page after page of her life, and conned them over.

The lonely and disappointed woman calls it all a blank. How she would welcome even the sorrow that should break in on the mono-

tony of her cold and unloved life! What sorrow too great, if it could but buy love! She thinks she is of no use to any one: that if her place were empty to-morrow, not a living soul would regret her. But she was wrong there: the very weakest and wickedest amongst us have some linked with our fate. There were two in that place who would have missed her: Cyrus Evelyn, who had grown accustomed to her presence, and liked her quiet ways; and Lettice, who really loved her pale, weary-looking governess.

Miriam thought of them: but was theirs the love to brighten life? No! "The one only love that could do that, will never be yours! never!" she said bitterly to her heart. "Oh! what a vain, presumptuous, erring fool I must have been! And now—what am I better?"

It was not customary with Miriam to rebel thus against her destiny; but it was Christmas-day, and that day has a train of thought peculiar to itself. We—I mean those whose lives are such as hers was—go reckoning back the many times that anniversary has dawned

upon us—drearily, wearily, unhopefully: how many times it has set, while we sat alone by the hearth, reading over the scroll of memory, in which the lightsome bits are so very, very few, and the cloudy times are counted by hundreds! The long, sunless day of her life! Oh! Miriam! unquiet, rebellious heart! it may have good in its later hours: hope on! Is there no happiness in ministering to the joys of others? Is self all in all? And, besides, if it be your lot, bear it philosophically. How many Christmas-days like this? up to the very verge of the allotted time of man—threescore and ten? Oh! weary life! Look abroad, Miriam, and be at peace! There are wearier souls than yours! *He* is not happy! you know he is not! With such an interest for him, as your heart has, it could not fail that you should read his secret. At first there was some pleasure in knowing that Maude had rejected him; but that rejection has driven him away: your eyes will be gladdened no more, even by the sight of him! And there is a pulse of pity awakened for him, and a bitterness against her, for

what she has done, which nothing can do away with.

As the evening shadows grow long on the snow, Miriam's spirit calms down. She is still alone ; and, by the fire-light, with her Bible on her knee, she reads here and there a verse, until she is quietened. There she muses in the twilight, but in a different strain ; and by and bye Lettice comes in, rosy and cold, and full of the praises of Captain Somerset and Mr Gower. The child throws off her bonnet, cloak, and furs, and sits down on the hearth-rug, with her head against Miriam's knee, and tells her what they have been talking about out of doors, and confides to her governess the opinion she entertains of her two companions ; she mimics them, and grows quite warm on the subject, till her eyes sparkle, and her cheeks glow brightly enough to rival Maude's a year before.

"We are to have a ghost-story to-night from Captain Somerset. You must go down into the drawing-room with me after dinner," said Lettice. "Come, Miss Sedley, do not make up that face of refusal, for my

mind is set upon it, and I cannot be disappointed."

"My dear Lettice, I am hard to move; I have grown attached to this quiet room: besides, my serious face would alarm you all more than the ghost," replied Miriam.

"Nonsense! nonsense! I will have my own way for once! You must and shall come!" persisted Lettice. "Your life has not been so very gay, that you should be sick of society, and avoid it so. Don't refuse me, Miss Sedley: cannot you make a sacrifice?"

"It would be less of a sacrifice than an indulgence, Lettice," said Miriam. "As for making sacrifices, I have never been put to the proof: I should imagine not. A solitary life is not the atmosphere to perfectionize any virtue. I have learnt to live by myself, and for myself. Others have not often cared for me; and, in caring for myself, I have acquired the habit of thinking of myself, first and last. No; I do not think I am capable of making a sacrifice of any importance. I believe I am quietly and habitually selfish."

"Now, if I believed you—which I do not—

I should not care for you as I do," said Lettice. "But, that I may correct any naughty habit that may be growing upon you, I lay my commands upon you to appear with me in the drawing-room to-night. I shall not suffer you to remain here alone to mope and turn solemn."

There was a playful pertinacity in the child's manner which Miriam found it hard to resist.

"Oh! I like to put out the lights, and sit in the glow of the winter's fire, to think!" she said.

"What of?"

"I can scarcely tell you. It is not of old friends, for I never had a friend; or of lovers, for I never had a lover; nor of father or mother, because I never knew them; or of my childhood, for I never felt as a child! What do I think of? Why, of things dim and indistinct, never to be realised: of things which never had a bodily presence or a name, but which make my solitude populous, and sometimes my heart glad!"

"I wonder you have not written poetry, Miss Sedley. You laugh?"

"How could I write of happy love, and fierce hate, and wild passion, who never felt them?"

"Can we not imagine them?"

"Nay! It is experience gives thought its poetry, and suffering that gives it strength. Why do you look at me, Lettice, in that questioning way?"

"I am trying to understand you: and I think I know no more of you than I did the first time we met. Tell me more of your thoughts: Are you happy?"

"Am I happy? That is a question I never ventured to propose to myself. I do not *often* repine; but sometimes, when I look back, finding not one memory to cherish, and forward, without anything to hope, I feel as if the love I see and hear of would be cheaply purchased by years of regret. Sometimes I wonder if there are many in the world like myself, who have known neither great joy nor great sorrow, and who will carry to the grave so blank a memory as mine. When I first began life as a governess, I used to say to myself—Oh! this life is dreary, and deadly

silent! and this for forty years or more!—And then—I never looked beyond—it seemed so far away: so very dim and distant! Now, as it draws nearer, mist and shadows are clearing off; leaving old age, grey and cheerless. But I thank God, that bitterness has not taken the place of human sympathies; and that I never railed against love, because it was not in the lot I drew at my birth."

"A governess' life was not a prize, certainly."

"Mine, Lettice, is one in ten thousand! It is a mistake to represent us as an ill-used race. There is a great deal of cant abroad respecting our social position. The main fault lies with ourselves: we expect too much, and feel ourselves martyrs when we are disappointed. Our life is, of necessity, a lonely one; but it needs not be wretched. A woman with a passion for society, and a sensitive nature, has no more business to be a governess, than has a man who sickens at the sight of blood, to be a soldier."

"But you—you shall live with me all your

life, and be happy. Promise you will never leave me!"

"I cannot promise. This is a pleasant haven; but I cannot be bribed, even by your affection, Lettice, to place my independence out of reach!"

"Then you do not love me as you ought!"

"Now, Lettice, you are unjust to me and yourself both. I do love you. But that is not to say I am to abandon my liberty of action, or to impose a grave, elderly woman on you for a life-long companion. Now, let me see you laugh again! Listen to the wind sweeping over the Chase, and the smart hail-shower, by way of accompaniment! Listen!"

"What a wild night it is going to be! You will come and hear the ghost-story?"

"Yes; since you have it so much at heart."

"Now, let us ring for tea!"

CHAPTER VII.

ROUND THE YULE LOG.

"Now, Floss! if ever you were quiet in your life, you must be quiet now!" whispered Lettice Talbot, crushing the little dog upon a cushion into a corner of the sofa on which she sate, with Miriam Sedley at one side of her, and Mr Gower within reach at the other. The party formed a circle round the fire, where the huge Yule Log was blazing fiercely; the ladies easily lounging, with screens held up by dainty hands to save their complexions from the scorching heat; the gentlemen, all more or less drowsy, except the two officers, had established themselves so that, if Captain Somerset proved tedious, they might retire into the land of dreams.

The Reverend Theodore manifested the strongest symptoms of a predisposition to sleep; indeed, his head rested on his chair-back before he had been in it five minutes; Sir James Clare would have gladly followed his example, but the inexorable Sara kept him on the alert, by balancing her foot over his gouty toe; and the worthy Baronet knew by experience that it would inevitably fall thereon if he showed any signs of sleeping in company.

The thick curtains were drawn closely over the windows; only a few lights were burning, and the distant parts of the room lay in shadow. An Indian screen across a recess made one nook very mysterious; this, with the storm blowing wildly without, and the Christmas fire burning brightly within, and a gay party gathered round it, made, as Captain Somerset observed, the most eligible situation for a ghost-story—much more eligible than a church porch or an undertaker's shop.

The narrator himself looked more dusky and grim than usual; his eyebrows were shaggier, and his moustache had a more determined downward curve. He sat forward on

his chair, slightly bending,—his keen eyes fixed on the fire for a few minutes before commencing: everybody looked attentive; there was a silence in the room, so that one might have heard a pin fall; and Lettice's heart beat fast, as with one hand on Floss, and her gaze on Captain Somerset, she listened breathless for the first words.

"It is a long time ago—when I was quite a lad indeed——" began the soldier.

Lettice drew a deep breath, and folded her hands on her lap.

"But I remember the occurrence I am going to narrate as distinctly as if it had occurred only last night. I have good reason to remember it, for it was the anniversary of my father's wedding-day, and of my birth-day—my sixteenth birth-day, Miss Lettice—and I had received from my father the very watch which has been my companion and servant in every quarter of the globe since that time. We were all at home then—my four brothers, my two sisters—father and mother—and an uncle, whose histories made a soldier of me.

"It was fine sunny weather, warm, but airy,

for we lived then at a little coast village in Yorkshire, and the air is always fresh by the sea. There were several of our school-fellows down at the place with their tutor, and we made an excursion a long way on the cliffs during the afternoon and evening, all in company, and afterwards returned to my father's house to dinner. We were a very merry party, you may be sure, and did not separate until late.

"After our visitors were gone, I looked at my new watch again, with a feeling of great importance, which I have never felt on any occasion since. I announced to my brothers and sisters, all younger than myself, that it only wanted five minutes to twelve o'clock. This information dispersed them like a covey of partridges, and with often repeated good-nights, they went to their rooms. I, with a deliberation suitable to the possessor of a new watch, lighted my candle, kissed my dear mother, and followed them with a martial step.

"At the door of my youngest brother's room, the four lads were talking in an earnest whisper, which my appearance ended; but I heard the two, who slept in a room adjoining

mine, laughing and talking, long after I was a-bed. I had a habit of drawing up my window-blind, for I did not like darkness then more than now; and this particular night I stood for several minutes with the casement open, listening to the breaking of the surf on the shore, and watching the effect of the moonlight on the waves. It was a fine night then; but there were some angry clouds driving up from the eastward. I wound up my watch carefully, examined the works again for the twentieth time, at least, put it on a table within reach of my arm, and got into bed.

"For some time I lay watching the clouds, and thinking how unnaturally still every thing was, and then I fell asleep. Whether I was dreaming at the minute, or wide awake, I could never tell; but there came a sound up through the air that startled me, and I jumped up, cold, and trembling, and clutching nervously at the bed-clothes. For some seconds I could hear nothing but the beating of my own heart, and then a low wailing sound, and the surf, and the low wind. I laughed at myself; but I could not get rid of a feeling

of uneasiness. I got up and looked at my watch—the hands marked a quarter to two. I could barely have slept an hour. As I stood by the window in the moonlight, that indescribable sound smote my ears a third time: it was like a call a long way off, and froze the blood in my veins. Attributing it, after some reflection, to an echo amongst the cliffs, and trying to steady my nerves by ridiculing my sensations, I once more resigned myself to my pillow.

"But it was all in vain: sleep I could not; so, yielding to my inevitable fate, I lay—never more wide awake in my life—wishing for morning.

"The wind was rising gradually, and by three o'clock it blew a perfect hurricane; the moon was hidden by heavy black clouds, and the darkness was becoming intense. The house in which we lived was old, and rocked before the blast to its very foundations: I wondered how it had stood so long. Then I thought how terrible the storm must be to the fishermen's wives in the little cabins half-way down the cliffs below us. This idea made me leave my pillow once more, and having

half-dressed myself, I drew a chair to the window, and sat down; though the darkness without made it impossible to see anything half a yard from it. The growling of distant thunder had made itself heard sometime before, and then the lightning darted through the night, for an instant making it light as noon-day. Flash after flash kept my attention awake; I looked in the direction of the Black rock, at the foot of which we had sat that afternoon, saying to each other, how terrible it must be to ships on a wild night, if driven on that part of the iron-bound coast.

"There was, on the land-side acclivity of this rock, a cottage, or rather a hut, inhabited by an old fisherman and his niece. A light in it glimmered like a star through the night: I could indistinctly see the light, not stationary, but moving to and fro, and up and down. I could not imagine what it meant; for we knew the old man well, and he never went to sea, though he had a boat, so it could not be that his niece was on the watch for him. Perhaps her brother might be out; but if he was, the light could be of no use to him: no body would

go up the Black rock to-night who was not forced.

"Whilst these speculations were running through my brain, a fearful flash of lightning illumined the sky; and distinctly—distinctly as I see you all now sitting round the fire—I saw a line of white figures wavering in the blast, and beckoning to me. For a second—a long second it was—I kept my gaze on the uncertain outline of those forms, and the next, the darkness swept them from my eyes. I did not scream, or become insensible, or rush from the window; but sat there until the next flash: they had disappeared; but again the long wail which had at first startled me out of my sleep, came wildly moaning on the night-wind. And that was the last time I heard it. The clouds in the eastward had begun to break, and the morning was rising, grey and stormy. I heard the clock in the kitchen strike five; and worn out with watching, I threw myself on the bed, and fell asleep. How long I slept I know not; but I was rudely awakened by a grasp on my arm, and my mother's voice in unusual excitement.

"'James, where are your brothers?'" she asked; and half-asleep as I was, a terrible thought came into my mind.

"'Are they not in bed?'" I asked, shudderingly.

"'No! they have never been in bed last night at all,'" was the reply.

"I did not tell her what I had heard and seen, but asked where my uncle was; he came in as I was speaking, and led my mother out of the room. I signed to him to return, which he did, after the lapse of a few minutes; and to him I recounted the night's strange sights and sounds. Like most naval men, he was superstitious; and when I had finished my recital, he lifted up his hands, and exclaimed, 'Now, God have mercy on your mother, for she'll never see her lads again!'—It was quite conclusive, he said: there could be no doubt on the matter—none in the world! My own overwrought feelings seconded his forebodings.

"In less time than it has taken me to tell it, I and my uncle were on our way to the beach, whither my father had preceded us. The fishers and their wives had all turned out to

hear, and to tell, and to conjecture. One certainty there was on the minds of all, that the boat belonging to Kester Lawson of Blackrock was gone, so was Kester's nephew Stephen, the lads belonging to Mr Rankin, and my four brothers. To reassure my father, one old sea-dog said it was only a stiffish gale during the night, and they would all come in during the day, none the worse for a drenching in salt water. But the boat was an old one—scarcely fit for sea at all—and my father was sadly despondent. As for my uncle, he stood quietly by until every body had had his and her say, and then he offered to take my father's arm, and guide him home. But my father refused to go; and offered any rewards to men to go out in boats in search of the missing lads.

"The offers were accepted: I and Mr Rankin in one boat, and my father and uncle in another, left the shore, and rowed along the coast for miles, but without finding any trace of the lost. Mr Rankin was half-crazed: the boys were not his own, but committed to his charge by their parents: how should he answer

for their disappearance? As for the scene at home, it baffles description. My mother raved and wept alternately. My father, accompanied by my uncle or myself, wandered every day along the beach. My poor sisters alternately wept for the brothers they began to mourn as dead, and strove to comfort each other and their poor mother.

"For me, the wild wail on the night-wind, and the beckoning figures, were enough: and for uncle John, too. They were all drowned —dead! Somehow, we neither of us gained courage to tell this circumstance to any other member of the family: we talked it over together, but kept it to ourselves. Advertisements were inserted in newspapers, rewards were offered, every search was made, every probability and every improbability, in the shape of conjecture, was exhausted. Thus three weeks passed, and there was no visible change in my mother. She had become wretchedly despondent; and my father was scarcely to be recognised for the man he was before. Still both absolutely refused to leave the place, and my mother said she would die there.

"One evening, exactly three weeks and four days after this event, our doctor, Mr Stevens, burst into the room where we were all sitting after tea, very silent, and very sad. His appearance was inopportune, and his manner of making it very extraordinary. He dropped into a chair, threw up his hat, caught it as it descended, and shook his stick in a revengeful way: altogether there was a mixture of glee and anger in his conduct, which, under other circumstances, would have been sufficiently diverting, but was barbarous as they were.

"'The young reprobates! I'd thrash every one of 'em!' were the first words he uttered in explanation of his irruption into our society.

"'What!' exclaimed my uncle, 'are they found?'

"'Every man jack of 'em!' was the reply.

"'I'll never believe in ghosts again,' whispered my uncle, as he passed out of the room. Every body followed him: even my mother, who had not moved from her sofa without assistance since the day of their disappear-

ance, was suddenly endowed with strength; but at the first glimpse she caught of the vagabond habiliments and disorderly appearance of her sons, she fainted.

"Then the lads came in, and were caressed, and fed, and questioned till past midnight, and restored to their beds—the only comfortable ones they had had since their moonlight sea excursion: and richly they deserved the privations they had undergone for the escapade they had made. In explanation of the freak, they said it had been in contemplation between them and Mr Rankin's boys some time; and that Stephen Lawson had been bribed to take them the first fine moonlight *night*—day would not suit them, as it was on the sly. Well, they set off; and, as I told you, the storm came. Having got them into the scrape, young Lawson did his best to prevent their destruction; and having gone farther than they intended, and, making sure that in his boat he could neither weather the gale nor make the shore, he had hailed a vessel passing near, which proved to be a Dutch merchantman from Hull, bound to Hamburg.

They were taken on board; and as their whole wealth was in their arms, the young scapegraces worked their passage, under the auspices of a tartar of a mate. After the first fright was over, some of them actually enjoyed it. They were shipped back to England, and landed at Hull, from which place they one and all tramped back to their homes, penniless, and very dilapidated as to boots and general clothing. That's all!"

"And there was no ghost after all?" said Lettice, who had listened breathlessly.

"The nearest approach to ghosts I ever saw were those wavering forms on the Black rock," replied Captain Somerset.

"But what were they?" asked the little girl.

"I am afraid to tell, you will laugh at me so; but if I really must—they were clothes hung out to dry or bleach; and the reason I did not see them the second time was, that Nanny Lawson had come out with a lanthorn and fetched them in, lest they should be blown away."

"And the wail on the wind?"

"Oh! that was, the three first times, Mr Rankin's lads shouting for my brothers, and the last time it was only my imagination."

"Ha! ha! very good story, I declare: a very good story, indeed!" said Mr Theodore Grandiose approvingly, opening his eyes as the voices ceased and the rattle of the tea-things was heard. It is my private opinion that the divine had heard nothing of the narrative but the opening line, for, though he did not actually snore, his regular sonorous breathing had formed a sort of running accompaniment to the story.

The conversation soon grew general, and every body had something to say about mysterious disappearances, and unaccountable sounds, and the very strange things that had happened to their aunts or grandmothers, when they were living in country houses in desolate localities; and then national superstitions were touched on, and legends, and mesmerism, and dreams,—all in a slight, sketchy way,—till Lettice began to think she lived in a very unreal world indeed; and confessing herself really sleepy, was marched off

to bed, after having had some tea and cake offered to her by Mr Gower, and having shaken Floss up, and crossed his temper in the matter of toast, which he liked soft, and which she offered him in the form of crust.

After tea came prayers, read by the Reverend Theodore impressively to the assembled household; and, it being ten, the drawing-room people dispersed to their own rooms, after the long day, and the servants in the hall began to enjoy the Christmas Night.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE SERVANTS' HALL.

THE founder of Houghton Priory had not been unmindful of the comfort of his retainers. The great kitchen was said to have been the refectory of the original building when it was really a religious house, before the division of the loaves and fishes took place at the Reformation. However that might be, it was a right noble and comfortable place on this Christmas night. An immense fire blazed up the chimney, and even its glow could not penetrate the gloom of the distant corners, only dimly indicated by the glint of the light on the polished dish-covers, and other domestic utensils, with which the walls were decorated. From a huge oaken beam that traversed the ceiling, de-

pended a bunch of misletoe, contributed by young Geoffry Meynell, the under-gamekeeper; and that susceptible and gallant individual had a concealed branch, which, during the evening, he had brought into frequent use, notwithstanding the protestations of the damsels so honoured, that it was a "'orrid shame."

The arched recess, in which was the wide range, was profusely adorned with evergreens: the laurel, the prickly holly with its red berry; and, lurking wickedly amongst them, another sprig of misletoe, surreptitiously concealed there by a precocious boy in buttons, with a pug-nose, who felt extremely audacious as he fastened it up before the company assembled, but whose heart failed him when the moment came to make it available.

In the seat of honour—a well padded armchair, in a corner by the hearth—sat the comely Mrs Mellow, coadjutor and direful enemy of Mons. Adolphe, *chèf-de-cuisine.* Opposite, on a large settle of carved oak, coeval with the kitchen itself, were the lodge-keeper Aaron Lee, his wife, and their baby on her knee. Mrs Goodhugh, a notable dame from

the village, a nurse, and species of locomotive chronicle. Close by Mrs Mellow, of whom he was supposed to be deeply enamoured, was old Kit Meynell, Geoffry's father, who was constantly at issue with Nurse Goodhugh on the subject of second marriages. Geoffry himself sat rather in the shadow, with his arm extended along the chair-back of a damsel in an astonishing cap; and clustered according to their respective fancies, nearer or further from the fire, were the smart housemaids and kitchenmaids, the grooms, footmen, and supernumeraries of all denominations; the afore-mentioned boy in buttons, hovering about perpetually, with something on his mind, of which he dared not relieve it.

Mrs Goodhugh, as the village oracle, was listened to with great respect by the party immediately round the fire; listened to perhaps the more benignly from the universal good humour which spiced ale and an excellent supper diffused through the breasts of the company. The subject of her conversation was a tiny morsel of a thing wrapped up in flannel—an actual baby, which she had taken

to nurse on the death of its mother, the wife of the curate at Holme, a village near Houghton. I did not mention this fraction of humanity previously, because, as it gave no outward signs of its existence, it was overlooked by every body there, until Nurse Goodhugh herself called attention to her nursling.

"It is a most odd thing, Mrs Mellow," she began; "but I always did think and say it would come to this. I always did think and say, and I always shall, that the blessed lady that's gone, knew that this here baby would be the death of her."

Mrs Mellow shook her head—an ambiguous shake: it might be that there was a hazy recollection in what served her for a mind, of having heard Nurse Goodhugh express a very contrary opinion, when they were partaking together of a "drop of something comfortable" on the very night that nurse was summoned to attend at the advent of the individual in question. But as Mrs Mellow's ideas were at no time remarkable for their lucidity, and she could not contradict the village oracle, she contented herself with shaking her head twice

or thrice; and nothing coming of it, she lay back in the chair, and blinked lazily at the fire.

"Ah! poor dear lady! a sweeter temper I never knew:" continued nurse, "and she'd a deal to go through. Ay, to be sure! how people are dealt with now! so different, if you only think, Mr Meynell! There's Polly Saunders, the mother of nine as fine children as ever you see, and only married eleven years come Candlemas! She let a doctor enter her doors?—bless you! never! There's where it is: I always did think, and say, that taking of too much physic is the ruination of folk's constitutions. This bairn will be wanting its pap;—where is that Betsy?

"That Betsy" was a little maid to wait on all the other maids, and bear their tempers now and then; but her special vocation seemed to be squabbling with the "boy in buttons."

"I'll go and see after her," said that restless youth, darting from the kitchen.

"This will ha' been a dowly Christmas for poor master" observed the damsel over whose chair Geoffry Meynell leant. She had left the

Curate's at Holme, and got in at the Priory through Nurse Goodhugh's influence.

"He at no time kept much company, didn't Mr Penwortham," added nurse.

"Was it a good place, now?" asked Mrs Mellow, rousing her dormant faculties.

"It was very well, in respect of beer and sugar," replied Susan, in a qualifying tone. "Missis was a good missis, and no ways close: if she had a fault, it maunt be me to cast it up against her."

Geoffry thought Susan lovely, and told her so.

"I feels for the poor bairn, for he is an uncommon good child," said Goodhugh, sighing: —he lay in her lap as grave and solemn as an archbishop! "No ways is a father to childer the same as a mother; she knows their wants best, as is natural: we ought to know, Mrs Mellow, having brought up childer to love and respec."

"Ay, sure! an' I've much to be thankful for, Mister Meynell, that they are all off my hands, and doing well," said the cook, turning to the old keeper.

"To be sure, ma'am! to be sure! I quite agree with you—exactly so," responded Meynell; brightening up at the sound of his name from the dozy state into which he had fallen after supper, and coinciding with he knew not what.

"I often lie awake o' nights, thinking of my Jem," said Goodhugh, after a pause, during which the whiffs of Aaron Lee's pipe and the whispered talk of the young folk became unpleasantly distinct for the latter. "Ah! Jem was a fine lad—the very moral of his father. And when I sits up with my sick patients, and between whiles looks out at winder, and sees the snow an' rain driving agen it fit to beat it in, I thinks, oh! what a wild night it is at sea! And I gets wondering where Jem is; and I goes on fancying the ship wrecked, and my poor boy houlding on for life to a bit of a mast, or a plank, or a barrel, and the cruel waves beating of him off, as we read on in books, till I feels downright crazed wi' fear. Then I reckelec's that God's Providence is over the sea as well as the 'arth; and then, after a

good cry, I comes round again, and gets quite comfortable."

A murmur of sympathy ran round the circle: every body remembered Jem, and what was more, every body liked him, though he was the wildest slip of a lad in all the parish.

"Ay! poor Jem!" continued the loquacious nurse; "it's three years agone sin' he went, and never a word, good or bad, have I heard on him frae first to last. 'Mother,' says he to me, the morning he went awa; 'mother, I arnt been the best o' sons to you; but I'll come back and mak' it up to you some day: don't fret, mother.' And when we brought him down to the Manor, or Ferry, and he seed his mates all collected to set him off, he was fairly beat: —I never see my Jem cry sin' he was a bairn till then. You mind Geffry Meynell, you gived him the red handkercher off your neck; for it was couldish, and he hadn't one so thick —and one giv him his knife, and another his pocket comb—and one giv him one thing, and one another, and so he went, poor fellow! but the very last words he said, was, 'mother, don't fret!'"

A sound of scuffling in the passage outside the kitchen-door, checked Nurse Goodhugh's reminiscences, and roused Mellow from her semi-lethargic state.

The noise continued for half a minute or so, and then in burst "that Betsy," with a bright-red face, and a very crushed cap.

"Johnny would—" she said, in explanation or extenuation of the disturbance outside.

"Johnny who?—would what?" demanded Mellow.

Betsy bestowed on the cook as contemptuous a glance as she dared, and then observed with a titter—"One would think, Mrs Mellow, you hadn't never been sweet-hearted:" a sally which hugely diverted the six-foot high footman, and made the boy in buttons glow tremendously.

"Oh! that's it, is it?" gasped Goodhugh, with a toss of her head. "Well, just hold this here baby a minit, while I makes his food, and then we must be going: it's well on for eleven o'clock."

The moment Betsy seized him, he awoke with a yell, and a succession of yells, that

startled the select party in the steward's room from their quiet cosy chat over a bottle of capital port, and dispersed all but Mons. Adolphe and Saunders, to their respective dormitories.

"There, now, did ever mortal see a chit, wanting to be married, take hould of a bairn the likes of that?" exclaimed nurse, indignantly; and, repossessing herself of the turbulent youngster, she ensconced herself in the easy-chair Mrs Mellow had just vacated, and condescended to give "that Betsy" directions for the making of the food,—firing off at her, during the operation, a series of contemptuous glances and expletives.

Betsy, crushed under a sense of her incapability, went about her task with consummate awkwardness—taking the pepper, instead of the powdered sugar, from the castors, to sweeten the pap, and only arriving at a knowledge of her blunder, when asked, with asperity, if she meant to "pison the bairn?"

"I always did think and say, that the great fault in the bringing up of families is, that young folk marry over soon," observed nurse,

giving a circular glance at the many detached groups scattered over the kitchen.

"Pray, how old might you be, Mrs Goodhugh?" asked Aaron Lee's wife, rocking her baby, which began to shew symptoms of wakefulness, to and fro on her bosom.

"Why, now—there's the rub! You'll say, I oughtn't to preach, for I was married mysel just before I turned eighteen," replied Goodhugh, with a blending of pride and confusion, at telling how early she had fulfilled her vocation.

"I was hard upon twenty," said Mrs Lee.

"There, now!" exclaimed Betsy, triumphantly.

"But I was more experienceder than you, Betsy!" rejoined Goodhugh: "my own mother had a large family, and me the oldest. I seed a deal of nussing afore I set up on my own account. Give me here that pap-boat."

Betsy obeyed gladly, and then withdrew a few yards off, to finish the quarrel with the boy in buttons, which they had begun in the passage.

Aaron Lee and his wife began to collect

their wrappings, for the cold walk across the Chase; and every body gave signs of thinking it was time to separate.

"Stop a bit! just have a drop of sommut to keep the cold out, Mr Meynell. Mr Lee, there's no hurry," said Mellow, bustling into the kitchen, with a foaming pitcher in one hand and a bottle in the other.

"Deary me! how the wind does go howling about this great big house, for all the world as if it was haunted!" said Mrs Lee, in a voice that made Betsy abandon Johnny instinctively, and advance into the light.

"There is nought worse nor ourselves," observed the damsel, to raise her courage.

"I should not like to be convinced—that's all!" said Goodhugh, solemnly. "There are a many queer things that I have heard tell on in the part o' the country where I lived when I were young: very queer things, indeed!"

"Let us hear some; do, nurse," said Betsy, persuasively, twisting herself into the very centre of the group round the fire.

"Now, this I've heard my own mother tell, as having happened to herself, just afore her

sister Mary died. Mary had gone away from home, secret like, to be married to a young sailor fellow, whom they'd contraried her about, and she was not heard on for three years after. My mother was a lass, then, and father was a-courting of her. Well, one bitter cold day, just after Christmas, my father, as was to be, went to market at the town, and made a promise to come in and see mother on his way back, and bring her sommut, by way of New Year's gift. Mother—she was like the rest o' us in our young days—instead of sitting to her work, when the house was tidied up, must needs watch out o' winder for her sweetheart.

Ours was a hill country; and just fronting t' house there was a steepish bank, with a row o' firs planted at top. It had been a pouring wet day; and there was a mist that you could not see your hand afore you out o' doors. But just in front of t' window there was a patch of light on t' grund quite clear for a couple o' yards or so, frae a lanthorn mother put out to guide father down t' garden path. Well, as mother sat there, thinking and won-

dering why he didn't come, all of a sudden a tall white thing swept through the light patch by the window. Mother screamed; and the thing past again and again, as quick as a gust of wind.

Grandmother was sitting by the fire, knitting, and she went to see what was the matter; but mother put her back, saying —'I have seen Mary's spirit,' for she was sure, though she could not tell why, that it was hers. Direckly grandmother hears that, she opens the doors, and the same shadow rushed by her into the kitchen, like a draft of cold earthy wind. Mother was nearly fainting; but grandmother, who was a soldier's daughter, and a Scotchwoman, was not a bit afeard, for she had seen a sight o' strange things i' forrin lands when she had travelled; so she left the door open, and sat down again by t' fire. 'It's likely the poor lost bairn should think of her home,' said grandmother. 'And Mary, honey, if you can hear me now, I forgae ye lang sin, for ye were my bonniest and best beloved of all my bairns; and I pray ye may hae the rest in yer grave ye hae na had on

arth many a long day: so ye may tak yer puir mither's blessing and forgiveness.' And wi' that the shadow swept out o' the door-way again, an' across the patch o' light, an' up the bleak hill, and was gone; but father, who came in directly after, said his horse was all in a tremble, and he could hardly get him past the rick-yard gate. And sure enough it was that night poor Mary died, as we heerd soon after."

"Well to be sure, only think!" gasped Betsy, who during this recital had drawn close up to Mrs Mellow, and actually, under the influence of terror, had clasped that dignitary's arm with no gentle pressure. Exclamations of awe and wonder went round, and then old Meynell stood up with his glass in his hand, and drank to their next merry meeting at Christmas time, with a significant leer at Mrs Mellow. Nurse Goodhugh was now enveloped in innumerable shawls, and capes, and boas; and there was a general scramble under the mistletoe, in which the boy in buttons, incited by a bumper of ale, grew very audacious, and was taken by the nape of the neck by

Geoffry Meynell, and deposited in the plate-basket. Then there were hand shakings all round, and more kissings; and then the door was locked after them by Saunders, who wished them well at home; and the domestic retinue, under Mrs Mellow's guidance, abandoned the kitchen, redolent of beer and tobacco, and scudded off to bed. The last person Saunders saw after he had looked to the fastenings of doors and windows, was Betsy dashing off up the backstairs winged by fear, thinking that the respectable Saunders, with his bunch of keys, might presently dissolve into a mysterious shadow. As for the boy in buttons, being overlooked, he passed the night in the plate-basket.

CHAPTER IX.

ACROSS THE CHASE BY NIGHT.

OLD KIT MEYNELL and his son parted from the other guests, at the door of the offices; for their way lay in a different direction acros the Chase. The game-keeper's lodge was in a distant and retired part of the Park, almost hidden amongst trees, and abandoning the beaten track, the two men plodded their way silently through the crisp snow. The moon was up, and shone out brightly, making the broad white tract of land over which they passed gleam ghastly in its light. There was a cutting wind full in their teeth, and a melancholy groaning amongst the bare tree-tops, that made Geoffry Meynell wrap his plaid more closely over his broad chest, and pull

his cap lower down on his brow. What a great massive pile the Priory looked standing out against the sky in the moonlight, with its curious gables and multitudinous chimneys! Here and there, as they passed along the front of the building, a light glanced in the upper windows, remained stationary a short time, and then was extinguished;—at last the whole face of the Priory was blank and dark.

"Phew!" whistled Kit, as a blast caught him, and prevented him going on for a second. "Phew! but it is a desperate night, Geff.!"

"Not so bad as last Christmas, father, coming frae Staunton," replied his son.

"That was a night! I did not think that Jefferson was the man to like a toun life. He was a fine fellow: he would ha' been the very deuce amongst poachers, but for them queer notions he's gotten into his head!" observed the old man.

"He knew his own mind best, I s'pose, father; there's no use forcing of a man to what he don't like. Now, if I hadn't been fond o' the woods, and birds, and my gun, and the like, would I ha' bidden by 'em? You

know I wouldn't, father! And so cousin Jefferson and I ha' both our own wills! I hope he'll do well, for the lasses' sake! For my part, I never could abide a toun: I feel a'most stifled among their close streets and tall houses! I'd a sight rather live i' a tent, as them gipsy folk do, than be smothered up in them lodging-houses!"

"A tent! on a night like this, Geff.?" said the old man, laughing.

"Ay! sure, and on mony a worse!" replied Geoffry, sturdily.

"The burn is rare an' full: when there comes a thaw, we'll ha' floods, I reckon!" said Kit, as they crossed the narrow wooden bridge which was laid across the stream for the convenience of foot-passengers.

This burn formed a boundary between the Chase and an unenclosed moorland tract, by cutting across a corner of which the Meynells gained their cottage. It stood in a hollow, surrounded by a garden, which was very pretty and blooming in summer, and formed Geoffry's chief delight. Indeed, the young man at one time had seriously thought of

being gardener instead of gamekeeper; but, after a trial of both, the more exciting employment won the day, and, to his father's great satisfaction, his son announced his preference for what the old man considered the noblest of all crafts—and Geoffry was duly installed under-gamekeeper. He was a fine, handsome lad, taller than his father, who had prided himself on his six foot in his youth, and his proficiency in all manly exercises: and Geoffry was athletic in proportion. There was not a youth, within twenty miles, a match for him in strength; and his known courage and daring made him the terror of all poachers, from both Hillside and Staunton.

With these physical endowments, Geoffry Meynell was as gentle in temper, and as kindly in disposition, as his mother had been; and Kit said of her, "She was an angel upon 'arth."

He was a universal favourite amongst the fair sex; but his father discouraged any serious love-making—telling his son he had a girl in his eye for him, who would make a

jewel of a wife; but refusing to disclose who it was until the time came.

Geoffry duly appreciated the old man's taste; and, though his curiosity was piqued, he contrived to pass the time very well in sweethearting Susan and the other damsels at the Priory, who had no objection to count amongst their "followers" the handsome young gamekeeper, although he never spoke of matrimony, and was only nineteen.

"There's that 'Winsome Willie' gotten back to Hillside! He'll give us summut to do, depend on't, Geff.!" said Kit, as the two descended the sloping path leading to their cottage. "He's the arrantest vagabond and poacher in the three kingdoms! The country'll have a blessed release on him when he's transported, as he's sure to be e'now!"

"Winsome Willie's gotten back, has he!" echoed Geoffry. "Wi' all my heart! I shouldn't at all object to a touzle wi' him one o' these shiny nights!"

"He'll ha' a bit o' spite agen me, I reckon, for I got him his last three months!" said Kit.

"Who cares for them rascally poaching varmint! Sure, father, we're more nor a match for them!" exclaimed the young man.

"But there's nought of the sneak about Winsome Willie! If thou's a match for him, Geff., thou's the only one hereabouts as is!" replied Kit, shaking his head.

"Why, father, it's summut new to see you thinking ony man a match for either on us!" said Geoffry, in some surprise.

"Thou hasn't seen Winsome Willie!—he's no the man to be despised!" added the old man.

"Most sartinly not!" laughed a remarkably deep voice, close at hand. Geff. and his father started at the sudden interruption; and, just as they turned the corner of a thicket, which brought them in sight of the Lodge, they found themselves face to face with the redoubtable poacher.

Winsome Willie stood leaning against the garden-gate, so that he obstructed their entrance; and he greeted the two new comers with a mock ceremonious bow, uncovering his

bushy black hair, and disclosing to Geoffry Meynell's astonished gaze, the countenance of a man of five and twenty, or thereabouts: a face remarkable for its regularity, yet sternness, huge black whiskers, hard mouth, and eyes glittering savagely beneath overhanging brows.

"I've been awaiting for you, Kit Meynell!" said the unwelcome poacher.

"So I parceeve! And what may your business be?" asked the old gamekeeper, shortly.

"That's your son, Geoffry, aint it?" asked Winsome Willie.

"Yes—and a likely lad, too—and a famous good shot!" said his father, proudly.

"He can stay then! What I've got to say, concerns him as well as you!" replied Willie. "Now, this is where it is, Kit Meynell. You've hunted me like a hare. Folks say, your bullet ended my brother Ned! Anyways, there's a desperate long score to settle atween us two! Will you take an oath to molest me no more?—to let me come and go as I will?—or, shall I take an oath to have my

revenge, when I can get it? An' you know Willie the Winsome!"

"A queer name for the like of thee," muttered Geoffry betwen his teeth; but not so low but that the poacher heard him.

"The lasses gave it me: there's different tastes you know—trimmings for all manner o' cloth. I shouldn't wonder if they called you 'Pratty Geff.,'' retorted the giant, with a sneer, measuring the lad from head to foot, and finishing his scrutiny by a prolonged stare at his beardless youthful face.

"Now, Kit Meynell, will you do what I asked: peace or war—which will ye have?"

"It warn't I, Willie, shot Ned. I warn't in the woods that night," replied Kit, willing to propitiate the poacher more for his son's sake than his own.

"I ha' heard *that* twanty times afore!" said Willie, impatiently: "I don't want to hear it again. But you ha' circumvented me, hunted me, gi'en me an ill name, and got me sent to jail mair nor once: all that I'll forgie if you give me your hand on it that I may come an' go as I list."

"I cann't do that by no means. I'm Miss Talbot's sarvent, and I'se much too auld to take up wi' the new-fangled way of not seeing what it's my duty to see," replied Kit, sturdily. "You keep out o' our woods, let our hares alone, and I'll molest none o' ye."

"Why are them wild things more Miss Talbot's nor ours?" demanded Willie.

"I won't hould no mair conversation wi' ye, Willie. Good night to ye," said the old game-keeper, making a gesture for the poacher to stand aside: which he did. Kit entered the garden, but Willie stopped Geff.

"Will you swear?" he said.

"To do nought but my true sarvice to Miss Talbot," replied the young man.

"Mind me then, Geff. Meynell, and don't cross my path, or I'll shoot thee down as I would a dog: I don't threaten for nowt!" And with those words Winsome Willie strode up the hill, his rags fluttering in the wind, and in a few seconds he was out of sight.

"I'se a doomed man, Geff.!" said the old

gamekeeper, as his son closed the cottage door after they had entered.

"Never fear, father, Winsome Willie is no the man to flay me! Let's get to bed."

CHAPTER X.

ROUSER.

THE day after Christmas-day, Lettice was up betimes, and away into the library to old Cyrus Evelyn, whom, since the arrival of Mr Gower, she was conscious of having neglected. To her great surprise she found the young officer standing with his back to the fire, deep in a discussion with the librarian. Whatever the subject of their discussion might be, it ceased immediately she made her appearance, and Mr Gower came forward to meet her, calling her "early bird," "fairy," and all sorts of pretty and appropriate names.

"Well, John is away to the barracks an hour since to fetch Rouser," said Mr Gower.

"Oh, I am so happy!" exclaimed Lettice, clapping her hands.

"And if you like him when he comes, you shall have him for a keep-sake—will you?" added Mr Gower, stroking down the bright hair of the little head leaning against his breast.

"Oh! may I keep him? Did you not tell me he was your great pet?" said Lettice.

"But you will take more care of him than any body else: I am going out to India," replied the young officer, "so I will leave him with you, and come and see him when I come home again to England."

"I am so sorry!" murmured Lettice, raising her eyes, filled with tears, to his face; "I am so sorry!" And as she spoke, her eyes wandered to an open atlas on the table, in which Mr Gower had been shewing Cyrus Evelyn the seat of the war, and the stations where Captain Somerset had been, and those to which he thought it possible his regiment would be sent.

Mr Gower had to go over his lesson a second time for Lettice's edification; and they had

only just finished it when the bell rang for breakfast. The officer left the library, and Lettice was alone with Cyrus.

"I always read the papers, Miss Lettice, and I get the Indian news off by heart, so you will hear of your friend now and then," said the old librarian to the child, as she stood thoughtfully before the fire.

"Tell me all you know about India," suddenly, said she, turning to Mr Evelyn.

Then the librarian reached down from the shelves certain volumes of travels relating to that far-off country,—shewed her the engravings with which many were crowded, and selected more especially those parts which spoke of the district to which Mr Gower was going.

Lettice was so deeply interested in her study, which was prolonged beyond an hour, that she did not perceive that her sister had entered, and was standing looking over her shoulder.

Miss Talbot remained motionless, watching with interest the eager flushing of the rounded cheek of Lettice, as she scanned the sketches of Indian scenery, although she was at a loss

to conjecture what had smitten her with so sudden a studious fit.

"Well, sister mine, are you meditating a pilgrimage to some eastern shrine?" asked Maude, at length, resting her hand softly on the child's bent head.

"Oh! Maude!" exclaimed Lettice, looking up from the book.

"Well! what is that little troubled face for this morning?" said Maude, kissing her.

"Mr Gower is going!" replied Lettice.

"Not till after Twelfth-day!—certainly not," returned her sister.

"But going to India!"

"He is a soldier."

Lettice resumed her examination of the book of travels, in which her young military friend came to help her by-and-bye; but India, and regret, and all to them belonging, were forgotten in an instant, when a deep bay was heard in the distance, accompanied with the muffled tramp of a horse in the deep snow, and Mr Gower jumped up, exclaiming—"Rouser!—come down into the Hall and see him."

Lettice needed no second bidding,—the fascinating volumes were abandoned, and the two left the library in haste, while Mr Evelyn collected the books to restore them to their places, shaking his head ominously, and whispering to himself, "Poor things! poor young things!"

Rouser was rushing round and round, covering himself with a powdering of snow, when Lettice espied him. He was admitted into the great Hall; but there, instead of renewing his gambols, he subsided quietly at the feet of his master, fixing on him his large clear eye with great affection. Lettice was on her knees beside him in an instant, stroking his wet head, pulling his long ears, and addressing him by all the endearing terms that had formerly been lavished on her old friend Lupa.

For some minutes Rouser's attention was not to be distracted from his master; but at last, he lazily turned his head and licked the little hand that caressed him.

"Now Rouser has sworn allegiance to you after his fashion; and, I dare swear, he will prove himself a faithful servant! Call him!—

see if he will follow you while I stand here!" said Gower.

The child ran across the Hall, and opened the door of the state dining-room, calling, "Rouser! good fellow! come, Rouser!"

The dog got up; went a few steps; thought better of it; and came back to his former position at his master's feet. Lettice stood and called.

"Go, Rouser! follow her!" said Gower, pointing to Lettice.

Rouser whined softly; rubbed his head against the young officer's hand; asked, as intelligibly as dog could ask, to be allowed to remain.

"Go!" repeated Gower.

Rouser went half-way; looked back; lay down, with his eye fixed wistfully on Lettice.

"Go!"

Slowly the huge animal dragged his reluctant bulk along the ground, and lay down at the child's feet. He did not attempt to move, even when Gower took his cap and went out into the snow. He only followed him with his eye, in which Lettice was sure she saw

tears. She spent a few more minutes caressing him, and then mentioned to him that they would go and see Mrs Mellow, and propitiate her. Rouser got up, shook himself, seemed to reflect on the propriety of doing his duty cheerfully, attempted a wag of the tail (which proved a very limp wag indeed), and then, with Letty's hand on his collar, they went to Mellow's quarters.

"Lor'! Miss Lettice! you aren't surely a-going to bring that great big dog in here?" said cook, in dismay, eyeing the viands, which she was preparing for the spit, with an anxious air; for Rouser's glance had kindled, and his nose instantly scented the dulcet perfumes to which he was being introduced.

Betsy was despatched to find a dish of cold meats in the larder, with which Rouser was plentifully regaled; and then having bestowed a mark of his favour, in the shape of a lick, on Mrs Mellow, which elicited the exclamation—"Beast!" from that worthy, Lettice and her new companion decamped. First he was introduced to Miriam Sedley, in the school-room; then to Cyrus Evelyn, in

the library; and then to the ladies in the drawing-room,—who all went into ecstacies over "his dear, darling, rough coat."

Maude looked at the dog, and left the room hastily. Floss perked himself up on a sofa cushion, and growled all sorts of defiances at his gigantic rival, who did not condescend to accept the challenge, but lay down all his long length on the hearth-rug, and found himself quite at home. Only when a quick step passed the windows, he raised himself half up and whined, but remembering, he sank down again meditative but sad.

"What a sensible dog! Faithful Rouser!"

Lettice liked him all the better for his evident unwillingness to transfer his affections from Gower to herself. They became in a few days firm allies; and though, after Gower's departure, he looked at each opening of the door for his old master, and hearkened to every man's tread in the house for a while, he grew reconciled to his change of circumstances, and found himself very happy in the company of Lettice and the favour of Betsy.

The boy in buttons was the only individual

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Boulogne—for the good of Sara's health it was stated, but most probably for the sake of recruiting their exhausted funds, which would not stand the drain of another season like the last.

Lord and Lady Linnet retired to their residence in one of the southern counties, and by degrees the rest followed to their own homes, or on other visits.

Christmas time is over and gone, and Houghton Priory is in peace once more. On New Year's Eve there was a ball, to which came the gentry from twenty miles round, the officers from the neighbouring towns, and all that was gay, gallant, and lovely. On New Year's Day there was a dinner to the tenantry; coals and blankets were distributed to the poor. High and low blessed and praised the Lady of Houghton. The bells of Houghton church rang from morning till evening, answered by those of Staunton, Eversleigh, and the hamlets amongst the hills, which had shared the good gifts of Miss Talbot. There seemed a promise of those long expected good times coming to pass in their day.

People gossipped, conjectured, and lauded; when suddenly, amidst their self-gratulations, they were astounded by the news that the Priory was shut up, and Miss Talbot was gone to reside abroad. Then people wondered, blamed, abused. They saw the windows closed; the snow that fell in February melted in the great avenue without receiving foot-print or wheel-track. Miss Talbot's measures were taken hastily: she consulted nobody on the change she intended to make, but one morning announced her intention to Saunders and Aimée, and Miriam Sedley and Lettice; and before people had time to question the why or the wherefore, she was gone.

Three days after the gates of Houghton had closed upon the travelling-carriage of Miss Talbot, Philip Warburton returned to the Manor to be present at his cousin's marriage, and the gossips had another subject to engage them for a while. Then Mr Wylie came over and looked after the cottages closely, and inspected every body's doings, and discharged servants, and settled about board-wages, and made himself very disagreeable and univer-

sally hated. Miss Talbot had left everything in his hands, and he exercised his power severely. There was no more mention made of the school-houses at Hillside and Staunton, and people growled their dissatisfaction in no measured terms; the ale-house kitchens were more than filled, and Winsome Willie was a great man in those nightly re-unions. Old Meynell, with his gun over his shoulder, and Geoffry not far off, kept a sharp eye about him; but the game-keeper had a latent dread of a collision with the poacher, for which his son had as great a longing.

The gentry of the neighbourhood looked upon themselves as an injured body of people, and faults, the existence of which had been hitherto unsuspected, began to be found in the character of the Lady of Houghton. A hundred reasons, each more impossible than the other, were assigned as the cause of her leaving England. Some opined she was consumptive, and that a warmer climate was necessary for her constitution; some, that she had lived beyond her income, mortgaged

Houghton to Mr Warburton, and gone abroad to retrench; some that she was in pursuit of a German baron, who had shewn himself insensible, during their acquaintance in London, to her united charms of purse and person. One said she meditated a pilgrimage to Jerusalem; another that she was bound for Rome; a third that her destination was Paris.

Whilst these floating rumours disturbed the minds of friends at home, Miss Talbot, comfortably ensconced in a corner of her carriage, was progressing by slow stages towards the south of France; not with a spirit at rest, assuredly, but not in the least ruffled by the dread of how her character might suffer in her absence. Independent of every body, "the world was all before her where to choose;" and she pitched her tent at last in a small town on the Italian frontier, by the Mediterranean.

Lettice was in ecstasies; with Rouser at her side she rambled along the shore, and laid up in her mind a store of fervid and romantic fancies. Her education went on in a desultory sort of way, dependent chiefly on the ca-

price of the hour. For a month, perhaps, she would consent to devote herself assiduously to the study of history; then followed a long interval of poetry and works of fiction, not at all likely to assist in forming a strong character. Now she would be seized with a musical mania, or a mania for out-of-door sketching; neither of them productive of much results. Then a new pony would absorb her time; and, in its turn neglected, her garden would have most of her care. Birds, botanizing in the fields, geology, in turn engrossed her attention. Scarce a whim to which the feminine disposition is a prey, but Lettice fell an easy victim to it; yet no disgust or weariness succeeded: each was lightly undertaken, to be as lightly abandoned as soon as a novel idea was started. Miriam Sedley gravely remonstrated, but with little effect. As for Maude, to see Lettice gratified was her first and last wish. The more difficult her fancies, the more pleasure Maude had in fulfilling them; nothing was too troublesome, nothing too arduous for her sister's gratification.

To please Lettice, the winter after they left

England was divided between Florence and Rome. First she must see Vesuvius—then compare it with Etna; next the leaning tower of Pisa; then the lake scenery in the north of Italy; thence into Alpine regions, through Switzerland. After a winter in Vienna; back again by Munich, where they spent a summer; through glorious Rhine-land, lingering long by the way; across France, with a month in aristocratic Bourges; westward to Bayonne; over the Spanish frontier, into the heart of Spain; two days in dirty Madrid, and a scamper back to Nice.

Miriam Sedley was in hopes that now they might rest. And so they did a while; but after a few months of masters and study, Lettice proposed going northward: she should like to see Waterloo. Tramp, tramp, on the road once more. Winter in Brussels. Further north, the fields of Norway, then to St Petersburg; a flight, rather than a journey, southward to Paris. Winter again there. Here Lettice fell ill. Those were anxious tedious months.

In the spring they took a villa, built and

furnished by an Englishman, at a little town a few leagues from Paris. There Lettice actually folded her wings; and, though recovered perfectly from the sickness that had perilled her life, announced her wish to settle there until they returned to England for good: a determination in which, probably, all her fellow-pilgrims were only too glad to acquiesce; for, guided by her erratic fancy, their journeyings had often been more lengthy than profitable.

With all these gratifications of her caprices, it may be suspected that Lettice Talbot grew selfish. Nothing of the kind: a more tender, loving little sprite moved not on the face of the earth. Everybody, every animate thing loved her. It could not be otherwise. She was beautiful; not beautiful as Maude had been—dazzling, brilliant—but delicate, transparent, as if a harsh wind would dissolve the frail thread of her life. To tell how Maude treasured her, and what hopes she formed for her, would be impossible; there is but one word to express her feelings for Lettice—Idolatry.

CHAPTER XI.

THE LITTLE MILLINER.

Miss Crookes' millinery establishment was the most fashionable shop in all Salford. She employed more "young ladies," who were selected from the throng of applicants by their "gentility" of appearance, than any other similar place in the town. Miss Crookes' young ladies, therefore, held their heads above their humbler sisters; and in all the dignity of good looks and conscious superiority, looked scornfully on them when they encountered in the street. To become one of this select band was Jessie Jefferson's early ambition. She felt that, as far as prettiness of face and elegance of figure went, she had a very good right to aspire to that honour; and as soon as her five

years' apprenticeship with Mrs Dawson drew to an end, she, without consulting either her father or her sister, offered herself as an assistant to Miss Crookes.

Miss Crookes had a vacancy. The remuneration was extremely small, and the work-hours very long; but it was a privilege: it conferred a diploma of beauty, to belong to Miss Crookes' establishment; and, overlooking all minor considerations, Jessie enrolled herself in that chosen band. There was a prospect of her becoming one of the show-room staff, by and by, as the head of that department was to be married soon.

Jessie was elate, and stepped homewards with a jaunty air, after the conclusion of this momentous treaty.

At sixteen she was deserving of the place to which she aspired, and for which beauty was one indispensible qualification. She had a slight, pliant shape, and an erect carriage; a face of piquante prettiness, and an abundant flow of light-brown hair naturally waved, which the little milliner knew how to arrange, so as to set off to the best advantage her

round, white forehead, and rosy cheek: for, spite of late hours and close sitting, Jessie's country bloom had not forsaken her. She was a good-hearted girl in the main; but vanity was her most striking characteristic.

Nelly, who had always lived at home with their father, went more plainly clad and did the household work, was rather despised by the gay, younger sister; but she watched over her with the greatest tenderness, and, gently as she could, warned her of her besetting sin.

As Jessie tripped along the streets, after her interview with Miss Crookes, she pondered in her heart the warnings of Nellie, and began to have some misgivings as to what they would say at home to the step she had taken. All fears and doubts were, however, forgotten when she came upon the bridge, for a figure before her, slowly sauntering on, called the blood to her cheek, and a fluttering tremor to her heart—half from delight, half from dread.

The gentleman (for gentleman, of course, it was) did not look back, but went on deliberately, until they came into the shade of a

narrow, ill-lighted street; gradually slackening his pace, until the girl was close behind him, when he turned suddenly upon her, and took her hand.

"I knew it was you! Every nerve in my frame thrilled when I heard your step!" said our old acquaintance, Frederick Linfoot, in a voice, the tones of which awakened a pleasant echo in Jessie's heart.

She attempted to release her hand, but Frederick held it fast, and finally drew it within his arm. The girl was too happy to resist, and the two walked on together very slowly. Frederick Linfoot could feel the little fingers, compressed within his own, quivering violently; and when they passed the lamps he saw that her cheek was flushed, and her eye glittering. Nobody being in sight, he stopped her under one of the lights, and looked her in the face.

"Why, Jessie, you're not afraid of me, surely!" he said, gently: "If you are, I will not trouble you any more!" and he made a gesture as if to leave her; not, however, relinquishing his clasp on her hand.

"No, Frederick! don't go yet! I want to tell you something!" said Jessie.

Mr Linfoot asked nothing better than to listen; and in a few minutes he had learnt all the girl's manœuvring to get into Miss Crookes' establishment. One of Jessie's chief incentives had been in the idea that she was raising herself more nearly to a level with the handsome junior partner in the Hardwicke factory: more worthy of being his wife. This crept out unconsciously in her narrative; and though, for a second or so, Frederick Linfoot's brow darkened, policy suggested to him the necessity of encouraging the idea, and he actually called her "his sweet little wife."

"But it cannot be just yet, Jessie! My mother is proud, and her feelings would be shocked if I married you now; but, after a while, when she comes to see you, she will love you as dearly as everybody must who knows you."

"Will you come home with me and see my sister? She would like to know you; and I am sure you would like her," said Jessie, hesitatingly lifting her soft eyes to his face.

"You have not told her what I have said to you?" asked Mr Linfoot, suddenly.

"Oh, no!—how could I?"

"That is right—say nothing yet! I must not be known by Mr Wilson to be intimate at any of our work-people's houses. He is a shrewd, practical man: it would injure me in his esteem."

He softened the refusal, however, with a kiss, for Jessie seemed disappointed. The fact was, she had half-promised Nellie to discard Mr Linfoot, if he refused to make their intimacy known to her father. But now that the time had arrived for putting her painful duty into execution, she felt utterly unable to do so; and, in the struggle, the tears that had been brimming her eyes, rolled down her cheeks, and she had to smother a sob which almost choked her.

Frederick Linfoot was puzzled. The girl loved him: of that he was certain; yet he had made less progress with her than, under the circumstances, he had expected. He began to doubt Nellie's influence over her weaker sister's mind; and, after kissing away

the tears from Jessie's blue eyes, he essayed his eloquence at undermining what he felt might prove a serious obstacle to his purpose.

"That worthy sister, Nellie, is a most respectable person, no doubt," he began; "but it has always been a marvel to me how she came to be my bonnie birdie's sister at all! She is full of old-fashioned notions and queer ways. She is so very plain spoken, and so antiquated in her attire, that, seeing you at church together, I often think you look like a lady and her maid. Now, my pretty pet, you must not, and shall not, turn into a home-slave like her. See what a pretty toy I have brought you!"

And as Mr Linfoot spoke, he shewed her a bracelet set with blue stones, which he insisted on clasping round her wrist; and in admiring the trinket, and thanking the donor, she forgot to defend the absent Nellie from her lover's sarcasm.

"Now, put it back in this box, and keep it for my sake, till you can wear it," said Mr Linfoot, after it had been sufficiently admired.

"May, I not shew it to Nellie? I have

no secrets from Nellie," said the girl, gently attempting to resist the hand which was about to unclasp it.

Frederick Linfoot cursed that faithful sister in his heart; but he smilingly told Jessie to do as she liked; and the bracelet was allowed to remain encircling the slender wrist.

As much as it is in the nature of a perfectly selfish man to love, Frederick Linfoot at this time loved Jessie Jefferson. But for that "world," of which he was a devout worshipper, he would probably have sacrificed better prospects for a marriage with the little milliner. Her innocence had the charm which nothing but innocence has for a man of thirty, who has really "lived his life." Then her beauty was fresh, and of a style to win such a heart as his, *blasé* of the elegances and hollowness of the society in which he habitually moved.

Comparing Jessie Jefferson with all the women he had ever known, he felt this little half-taught girl had more natural grace, and more purity of spirit, than any ten. Once his

wife, she might become, under his careful tendance, a model of fashionable ease, for she had tact and quickness, and a very sweet voice —nothing more than voice betrays the low-bred woman. But though these ideas had passed through Frederick Linfoot's mind, they had not produced any fruit. He could not quite give up the hope of a brilliant alliance a few years later; but that need not interfere with his present amusement.

But for that sister Nellie, the man of the world would have been confident of its ultimate results. Jessie, however, was so steady to Nellie, that as yet her love for Frederick Linfoot had not led her to tread under-foot the calm household affections which had been hers so long. She could not lie down by Nellie at night, without pouring into her anxious ear any little communication she had withheld while they sat up sewing. And Nellie, in all her anxiety, was never harsh—never endeavoured to detach Jessie from her lover, by telling how little likely Frederick Linfoot, a partner in the Hardwicke Factory, with a handsome house in the country, horses, car-

riages, and all the appliances of wealth, was to take the child of one of his own work-people for a wife.

It was Nellie's constant care to prevent any division between her sister and herself. Her grandfather's committal of Jessie to her guardianship had always been kept devoutly before her eyes.

As a child, she had been yielded to continually, and all extra shillings were devoted to the decoration of her pretty little person. Their father looked on complacently, content to see none but happy faces about him, and perfectly satisfied with the results of a town bringing-up. He thought Jessie a sprightly pretty lass; but Nell was his peculiar pride and darling. Her sterling sense, her firmness of character, found acceptance and favour in the sight of the strong, half-lettered artizan. He permitted her to study the books which he had from the lending library of his clubs—books often of an evil tendency for men like him, but fraught with no danger to an upright mind, strengthened by religion, like Nellie's. He rarely passed his evenings at home; but

whenever he did so, he would talk freely to his daughter of the state of trade, of the Trades' Unions, and the principles that connected them—of his own disappointments, and his own hopes, under an amended state of things.

To Jefferson's credit, be it spoken, since he had settled in the town, he had been a steady workman, and since his engagement under Mr Wilson, who took the Hardwicke factory after the fire, a sufficiently remunerated one.

They had quitted the rooms over the huckster's shop, and rented a small house, one of a row which replaced some destroyed in the fire. This house was Nellie's peculiar pride and care. Nothing could surpass the cleanliness of every nook and cranny about it; the door-step was as white as hands could make it; the door-handle and knocker shone again, and the knitted blinds to the windows were exquisitely white. If luxuries there were none, comforts were not wanting within, and even some attempts at decoration. There was a lithographed portrait of Philip Warburton, in a frame of Jefferson's own making, over the mantelpiece in the day-room, and two busts

in bronzed plaster, on brackets, at each side of the window. Several flourishing plants stood in the deep ledge; and on the table beneath, grandfather's Bible, and a neat work-box which Cyrus Evelyn had given Jessie.

By the cleanly-swept hearth, on the evening when we have re-introduced Jessie and Mr Linfoot to the reader's acquaintance, sat Nellie, diligently sewing at the fine plain-work with which she added much to the comforts of home. The little table at her side supported a single candle and her sewing implements, with the various parts of the garment she was engaged in fabricating. The curtains were drawn close over the window, and the room looked full of light from the clear fire reflected in the polished dish-covers which ornamented the walls, and in the face of the old clock, whose tickings, mingling drowsily with the singing of the kettle on the hob, were the only sounds in the house. A great grey cat lay at length before the fire, with his round head on Nellie's gown, in undisturbed enjoyment of the warmth and the quiet. For days he was the girl's only companion, from morning till

Jessie came in at night, and of course he was a supreme favourite.

Nellie's fingers plied her needle assiduously. Spite of Mr Linfoot's criticisms, there was nothing in her appearance to justify the epithet of "antiquated."

To be sure, she did not study the mode as her sister did: their positions were different. Her attire was neither old-fashioned nor ill-fashioned. It consisted simply of a lilac printed gown, neatly made, linen collar and cuffs, and a black apron. Her face had not Jessie's beauty, but it was a good honest face; clear brown eyes, and dark hair shining and smooth; a full white chin and throat; a brilliant complexion, rather too ruddy, and an open forehead. She was certainly very good-looking.

Many of her father's friends had wished to transfer this cheerful, lightsome girl from his hearth to their own; but hitherto nobody had been successful: Nellie was hard to please, it seemed.

As yet there was no sign in her rosy face and plump figure that life had been a hard chapter

to her. She had the blessed disposition of looking on the bright side of things, and being contented with the small joys that fell in her way. There was a glimmer of her father's pride in her eye, and a suspicion of rigidity about her lips that might become hardness; but as yet, Nellie's pathway, if toilsome, had not been dark or dreary.

As Nellie sat stitching away, the clock suddenly struck eight. She got up, peeped out of the window, said to herself that Jessie had not kept her promise of coming home early, wondered when her father would be in, stroked pussy, who had got up to rub himself against her gown, and then sat down again, humming over to herself a bit of a popular ballad. She had scarcely been seated five minutes, when a quick step passing the window sent her to the door to admit Jessie. The little milliner came in shivering, and saying the nights were beginning to be very cold now.

"Yes! it is time you left off that bit of a silk cloak, and wore your plaid," said Nellie, helping her off with her bonnet.

As Jessie raised her arm to undo her

cloak, the glittering bauble round her wrist caught her sister's eye. Jessie laughed.

"Yes, I met Fred—he gave me it," she said, bringing it forward to the light to exhibit its beauties. Nellie looked, but said nothing.

"Well, isn't it pretty?" asked Jessie.

"Pretty, Jessie! yes! pretty enough for Mr Linfoot's wife or sister, if he had one; but such gauds are not for the like of us: what will father say to see you tricked out that way? Pray ye take it off," said Nellie. "Even Mrs Dawson could not approve of it, though she does like to see her girls nice."

"I'm not going to stay at Mrs Dawson's always," replied Jessie, unclasping the bracelet, and putting it into its case, and then into her pocket.

"Where could ye be better?—she is kind, and you are not so hard worked as some of those dressmakers' people are," said Nellie.

"What should you think if I were to get in at Miss Crookes'?" answered Jessie, smiling.

"Miss Crookes'! why, I should be sorry for it!" replied Nellie, lifting her eyes in some surprise from her work, which she had taken

up once more. Jessie coloured, and looked for some minutes at the fire.

"Why should you be sorry?" she asked, suddenly; "it is the most fashionable shop in Salford."

"If that is its only recommendation, I'd rather a deal you stayed with Mrs Dawson; Miss Crookes' girls don't all bear good characters; they are kept very late, and not overwell fed or paid," returned Nellie.

"I'm going though; I've got engaged this afternoon. I got holiday, as I said I should, and I went to Miss Crookes': she is glad enough to have me; and may be I'm to be in the shop after Christmas," said Jessie, recklessly plunging into her story.

Nellie looked both surprised and grieved.

"You should have told me, Jessie, before you did such a thing: it was not right, and you so young, to go without speaking to father or me," said Nellie, reproachfully.

"Young! why, wasn't I sixteen last month?" exclaimed Jessie. "I had made up my mind, that stay at Mrs Dawson's I wouldn't, after my time is up: and you would not have

liked me to go to London—so there was nothing for it but to go to Miss Crookes'. I can't think what you have against her. She has the genteelest custom in all the town; she makes even for the county families,—for the great Miss Talbot of Houghton, and the Dobbs', and Mrs Warburton: she has made a bonnet this summer for the Duchess of Netherby, even. Now, Mrs Dawson's grandest customer is Parson Morton's lady, and Mr Crofts' girls are her best: no great things, for nothing looks well on *them*."

"Well, Jessie, I would rather have you at Miss Crookes' than that you should leave us altogether; and as you have done it, you must promise me not to stay out later than needs, and not to go home with any of the girls," said Nellie.

"Oh, yes! I promise,—only you tell father! I don't know how he'll take it, for he likes Mrs Dawson, and I've heard him say he couldn't abide Miss Crookes," returned Jessie, evidently relieved at having told Nellie what she had done.

"I can't speak to him to night: it is his club

night—he wont be in till late. So you met Frederick Linfoot after you left Miss Crookes'? Of course you told him: what did he say?" asked the elder sister.

"Oh! he was well enough pleased, I thought. You know Miss Crookes' girls are thought more of than Mrs Dawson's," said Jessie, hesitatingly. Nellie shook her head.

"Why are they thought more of?" she asked, gravely.

"Oh! I dont know—they are genteeler, and dress better: that must be it," replied Jessie, shading her burning cheeks from the fire with her hand.

"Well, Jessie, I hope you won't have cause to rue it; I'd a deal rather you'd stayed where you are. Well; we'll say no more about it, since your heart's so set on it," added Nellie, hastily, seeing the impatient tears rising into her sister's eyes. "What is the best news with Mr Linfoot to-day?"

"Nothing particular. I asked him to come over and see you, but he said it wouldn't do; Mr Wilson would not like it. I think Mr Wilson must be a proud old man," replied

Jessie, playing with her apron-string. "Who's that at the door—somebody's knocking?"

Nellie got up and went to see who the late visitor was.

"Father at home?" asked a rough, manly voice, as soon as the door was open.

"Oh! Mr Meynell, sir, is it you; father's not at home, but he'll be in by and bye; step into the house an' rest," exclaimed Nellie, cheerfully. The invitation was accepted; and the next minute Kit Meynell shewed his frosty head in the bright room, bowing low in his way to Jessie, who had risen from the elbow-chair to make way for the new comer. The old game-keeper dropped his cap on the floor beside him, and put his great hands before the fire to warm them, looking briskly from one girl to the other as he did.

"Surely that ain't my little friend Jessie! ay, it is though: how you are growed," said Kit, looking admiringly at the pretty milliner.

"We've been here a day or two, Geff. and me," added Kit; "but we'se been so busy up at Court-house yonder, that we ha'nt been able to come down afore to see father, but I reck-

oned he was most like to be in o' nights; I tell'd Geff. to call for me here, as he came frae t' Court, where he stayed wi' some friends: 'deed but they works hard them judges: it was nine o'clock last night afore they'd finish'd; and it'll be later still to-night."

"Have you to be witness in something?" asked Jessie.

"Yes, a country fellow has been getting himsel into trouble about our game again, and he shot at me; no great harm done, but it's likely he'll be transported: Winsome Willie never was quiet, so I hope they'll send him out of harm's way," returned Meynell.

"Father 'll be in enow, I hope, and he would like to hear about Willie: they were a kind of mates when they were young, though father is the oldest by a good many years," said Nellie, getting up and laying aside her work, on hospitable thoughts intent.

The supper-table was soon spread with bread, cheese, and beer—nothing more luxurious ever could appear on Jefferson's table for that meal; and when the girls were alone, they always contented themselves with the

bread alone; but this was a sort of festive occasion: the elder Meynell did not visit the town twice a year, and Geff. was a rarer comer, than one at least of the family could have wished.

As Nellie went about her preparations for supper, Jessie, always observant of her staid sister, and now particularly so from a shrewd suspicion that she had, saw that there was a tremulous haste in her movements, and a flushing colour in her cheek, that betrayed an unusual degree of excitement.

Jessie was not long in giving herself ample reason for these symptoms. She did not, however, offer to assist her, for the white-handed little milliner was always exempted from household service.

Old Kit Meynell, though at first sight he had been struck with Jessie's lightsome grace and pretty attire, soon privately acknowledged that "such cheeny-ware war not fit for his son;" and he hoped the susceptible Geff. would not be caught by her brilliance, and overlook the more useful charms of her sister.

He might have spared himself the doubt and the fear; Geff. was a sensible fellow, and

thought Jessie was no more to be compared to Nellie for use and goodness, than gossamer is to broadcloth. In that conclusion the young gamekeeper was not far wrong.

The supper-table was scarcely spread, when another knock at the door announced the arrival of Geoffry. Nellie went to open the door, and ushered him into the kitchen, glowing with his walk, and perhaps a little with the pleasure of seeing Nellie again.

The gamekeeper's son was greatly improved from that night at Houghton. When he took off his cap, he revealed a head covered with curly black hair, and a handsome bronzed face, with clear dark eyes, and teeth dazzlingly white. His figure was taller than that of his father, and athletic enough to make the stoutest of poachers quake.

He was not, of course, more bashful than in his youth, and offered to kiss Jessie—a familiarity from which the little milliner shrunk in a way that effectually checked its repetition in future.

Geoffry appeared quite content to resign himself to his repulse, and sat down in the

chair Nellie brought forward towards the fire, without taking any further notice of Jessie.

His father devoted himself to the younger sister, and Nellie, though she scarcely spoke ten words, was quite absorbed by the whispered account of his doings since their last meeting, which Geoffry thought himself called upon to give to the chosen of his heart.

Nellie looked quite happy—placidly so. The little fluttering of anxiety, lest he should not come, and doubt of the manner in which he would talk to her when he did, were over. Nellie was no coquette; if she had wished ever so much to hide her pleasure, she could not have done so. Her happiness shone out on every feature, making them almost as pretty as her sister's.

Geoffry thought he had never seen any girl so bonnie; and he told her so. Nellie blushed, then Geoffry blushed; and then, in a hurried whisper, he stammered out something about staying over Sunday, and taking a walk with her, as he wanted to have some talk about what nearly concerned them both. Nellie would have encouraged him to do so; but Kit

had overheard the latter part of his son's speech; and, though sorry to disappoint the young folk, he shook his head and said, it must not be on "no account."

"And why not, father?" asked Geoffry Meynell.

"There are a sight of bad folk strolling the country just now, and I don't want to leave my business iv other people's hands longer than needs!" replied the old man. "We shall ha' been off three days if our trial comes on to-morrow. We can't be spared no longer."

"But, father, you can do without me for a bit?" pleaded Geoffry.

"Surely! yes! so I can, to be sure!" responded Kit, briskly; "what a doited auld fule I mun be growing, to fancy, 'cause I ha' a son, he mun allus be at my heels. Stay, Geoffry, by all means, if Miss Nellie there wishes!" and there was an intelligent twinkle in his clear blue eye, as he looked over to the rosy girl, which made her blush to the roots of her hair.

Jessie did not like his "coarseness," as she phrased it, and was glad she was not exposed

to anything of the kind on Frederick Linfoot's account. The vain little milliner was not long in instituting comparisons between her sister's lover and her own—always to the ad vantage of the latter; though to any less prejudiced eyes, Geoffry would have seemed decidedly the handsomer fellow of the two.

Jessie set store by fine clothes, rings, pins, studs, &c., decorations which Frederick displayed, in addition to his personal attractions; but unfortunately for the foolish girl, he had not under his fine vest that priceless gem of an honest, upright heart, which beat beneath Geoffry's fustian jacket. So Jessie plaited her apron string in her small fingers, and wound her bright curls, and twitched her cuffs, and looked at her tiny, neatly-shod feet, and felt herself quite a superior sort of person, by virtue of the dignity of having a gentleman for a sweetheart; and she secretly scorned the brown young gamekeeper and his grey-headed father, hoping that Frederick might not hear of it, for she was sure he would not like the connection.

Soon after ten o'clock, Jefferson not having

returned, the Meynells took their leave, promising, if detained over the morrow, to come in during the evening, to see Frank. Nellie "tidied" up the kitchen, left her father's supper on the table by the fire, and then the two girls went up to their chamber above. Jessie had already begun to rally her sister on the acquisition of such a handsome lover as Geoffry; all of which Nellie took in good part, for she believed what her sister said in his praise to be in good earnest.

"I wish your Frederick Linfoot were such another!" said Nellie in her honest pride, forgetful for once of how her sister's thoughts were bound up in her lover. Jessie fired up instantly, her eyes flashed, and her lips quivered passionately.

"Frederick Linfoot is worth twenty Geoffry Meynells. I would not—no, that I would not —have that young, gamekeeping countryman for my husband, if there was not another man in the world!" she exclaimed angrily.

Nellie looked both startled and annoyed.

"Why, Jessie, you have been praising him all along: what do you mean?" she said.

"I mean that you are very unkind about Mr Linfoot. Geoffry Meynell can't be equal to him: Frederick is a gentleman!" said the milliner.

"He may be better to me," replied Nellie, in a low voice.

"You are so different to me: as Frederick says, it is strange we are sisters!" said Jessie, in a conceited tone, proceeding with the business of the moment.

"You are prettier, and you have livelier ways than I have Jessie; you are a deal cleverer, too, in most things: but don't—don't let anything divide us two!" pleaded Nellie, putting her arms round her sister's neck. Jessie suffered the caress, but she did not respond to it: Frederick's insidious words had not been altogether without effect. Nellie was hurt, and did not speak again for some minutes. Jessie had got into bed, and had turned her face from the light to go to sleep.

"Jessie!" said Nellie, leaning over her; "Jessie!" There was no answer. "Jessie, just say you are not vexed with me: I did not mean anything against Mr Linfoot, only

you know I could not tell you were making fun of Geoffry Meynell. He is not so smart and gay as your Frederick; but I like him; and no fine gentleman would ever think of falling in love with me, you know."

"That is all very well: I am not vexed now; only I don't like you to think anything but good of Frederick. I wish you knew him: you'd never have another word to say against him, I'm sure," replied Jessie. Nellie kissed her, and that little sisterly tiff was over.

The next evening Jefferson came in to tea, and about five minutes after, Kit Meynell and his son followed, both looking somewhat harassed and put out.

"The fellow has got off after all!" were Kit's first words as he entered the kitchen.

"I'm right glad of it: hang them game-laws, say I!" exclaimed Jefferson, shaking him heartily by the hand. "He was a kind of friend of mine was Winsome Willie, when he was only a lad and I was a young man. I suld 'nt like to hear of his getting into any grand trouble."

"But he will 'enow, mark my words!" said

the old gamekeeper solemnly; to whose mind had returned, in all their force, the warnings the poacher had given him for himself and his son.

"How did he get off?" asked Jefferson, when they were seated round the fire after tea.

"Some flaw or other: one never knows where to have them lawyer fellows!" replied Geoffry, with some asperity. Jefferson laughed.

"Well, I'm always glad to hear when a fellow slips through their fingers, if they've naught to bring agin him but shooting or snaring the wild birds of heaven," said the artisan, rubbing his hands.

'T'warnt that only," said Kit. "He shot at me; and though he missed, it ain't a comfortable thing to know there's may be behind the next bush a man who has tried to take one's life, and who won't stick at having a try to mend his mistake a second time. Besides, he threatened the lad there!" pointing to Geoffry.

Nellie bent forward shuddering, and listened with redoubled attention.

"I fear no such varmint, father!" said Geoffry.

"Of course thou'd fear no man alive in a fair stand-up fight, else thou'd be no son o' mine," responded Kit; "but there ain't a man in England big enough, or strong enough, to prevent hissel being hit when a fellow fires at him fra' behind a hedge or a wall. So I hope God Almighty 'll keep us, sin' Winsome Will is loose again, for we can't tell when or how he may try to have us now."

"Pshaw! nonsense, man! Why, I thought you'd more spunk!" exclaimed Jefferson.

But the old man's mind was evidently depressed. Geoffry, while Jefferson was trying to rouse his father, was explaining to Nellie how he could not stay over Sunday, as the trial had taken this unexpected turn; for he did not wish his father to go home to Houghton alone, or to have to do his nightly duties without his assistance.

"But you don't really think Winsome Willie has any ill-blood against you, do you?" asked Nellie, anxiously.

"Ill-blood enough, and this last matter won't make it better," replied Geoffry.

"Miss Talbot will be rare and angry; I

won't be the man to face her, and tell her it all: Mr Wylie may," said Kit, addressing his son.

"'Taint our faults: as you say, Miss Talbot will be mad wi' vexation: she said only t'other day, Winsome Willie deserved to be hanged!" replied Geoffry.

"She is a hard woman that, if what folks say be true," said Jefferson.

"Main hard, for a lady so young—but just. —Oh, yes! she's just!—but she has a hard way wi' her—'special with them she takes agin; and she can't abide Willie," said Kit, shaking his head. For a few minutes the old man sat gazing into the fire, his hands resting on his knees; then heaving a deep sigh, he rose.

"Come Geff. lad, we mun be riding: it's a goodish stretch to Houghton," he said.

The young man instantly obeyed. He had left something in the passage which he and Nellie went to seek: they were a considerable time finding it, and Jessie could not discover what it was; but no doubt they knew. Then there was hand-shaking; and between two, a

somewhat warmer kind of farewell, and the old gamekeeper and his son departed.

"Kit Meynell fails," observed Jefferson, shutting the door when they were gone—"he fails fast; but Geff. is a fine lad. Nellie, lass, thou hast made a rare good choice: when will you do as well, Jessie?"

Jessie laughed, but made no reply; she was thinking how surprised he would be if she were at liberty to tell him what a chance she had of becoming Mrs Frederick Linfoot. But prudence prevailed, and Jessie held her tongue; though not without some difficulty, for her father's words conveyed a sort of taunt, ill-pleasing to her feelings. Their father soon after went out to spend his evening at the club, and the girls were left to their sewing.

"I must make the best of it," said Jessie; there will be no chance of getting home to tea now and then, when I go to Miss Crookes'."

"No!" briefly replied Nellie. The elder sister was in a dull mood, and for once Jessie tried to be silent, and succeeded.

CHAPTER XII.

A TERRIBLE DEED.

THE night was closing in as the two Meynells rode out of Salford. A long road lay before them, and the old man was already fatigued. He scarcely spoke after they quitted the Jeffersons' house; and Geoffry, though he was aware of the cause, could not help thinking his father's depression greater than the occasion warranted.

The escape of Winsome Willie had disappointed both. They had been sure of a conviction, and his being once again let loose on society, was to be deplored, but could not be prevented by the efforts of the counsel for the prosecution; though everybody who heard the trial was persuaded of the guilt of the accused.

Some flaw in the indictment gave a loop-hole for his escape, of which Willie's counsel was quick to take advantage; and the trial terminated in an acquittal.

With what feelings the poacher had listened to the evidence borne against him by the Meynells, may be imagined. He left the bar free, but with a heart more than ever burning for revenge.

The younger gamekeeper rode a few paces before his father, lightening the way by whistling the then popular air of "Rory O'More," and thinking over his pleasant chat with Nellie Jefferson. It was a dark evening, and, before they had gone many miles, the rain began to fall with a steady pour, which threatened to continue.

"Come, father, let us take the bridle road through Frenton Wood: it will shorten our ride half a mile," said Geoffry Meynell, turning from the high road, down a narrow bye-lane, enclosed on either side by high quick-set hedges.

Kit would have preferred keeping to the

highway, but he did not say so — his fears began to look cowardly to himself.

"It is coming on a wettish night," observed Geoffry, as his father came along-side of him.

"Ay, we mun ride a bit faster," responded the old man, spurring on in advance.

He kept the lead until they entered the wood, and then he suffered Geoffry to take it.

This bye-way cut off a considerable detour in the road, and brought them out at an angle of the Eversleigh lands. Kit felt his heart considerably lightened when they issued from the gloomy plantation upon the broad road. For a quarter of a mile further, the park-wall of Eversleigh bounded the highway on one side, and a shrubbery on the other. Kit had a watchful eye on the latter; and, although he kept his suspicions to himself, he scarcely expected to reach home without some catastrophe.

Nothing occurred there, however. They emerged upon a wide moorland tract, where they could see to a considerable distance on every side. There were no bushes near the

road—nothing to conceal a lurking ill-doer. Kit's courage revived.

"We'd better ha' stayed at Salford all night; we'll get rare and wet," said Geoffry.

"Thou mun gang up to the Priory to-night wi' the news, wet though it be," replied the old man. "Miss Talbot won't like it any the better for being kept frae her till to-morrow."

"Me, father!—you'd better gang—she always flytes me so," said Geoffry, laughing.

"Words break no bones," responded Kit, shortly.

"Lord! warn't it capital fun to hear her putting down Mr Tempest! I guess he never met his match afore. Was Miss Talbot ever different frae what she is?—was she allus hard and strict?" asked Geoffry.

"Thou might remember; thou warn't a lad when she went into foreign parts," replied Kit. "She never was soft spoken like Miss Lettice; but she was a very beautiful lady—grand and proud-like, but good to poor folk when she could recollect 'em."

"She lets that Mr Wylie ha' more say in her business than needs. He's a deep chap,

is Wylie !" observed Geoffry. "Ain't he raised the rents again, father, on the cottagers? Aaron Lee telled me summut about it."

"Yes, he's raised 'em," replied Kit, bitterly. "Indeed, he's done all he could to make folk hate both him and her. It's main likely he'll succeed."

The rain, that had kept up a steady pour from the time they left Salford, now came pelting down in the men's faces. Geoffry faced the storm steadily, but Kit more than once audibly wished himself at his own fireside.

"You're growing mighty tender all of a sudden, father!" said his son, after an impatient ejaculation from the old gamekeeper.

Kit was silent, and they spurred rapidly onward. Another half hour's sharp riding brought them to the gates of Houghton Chase. Aaron Lee was just going into his lodge. His wife was standing at the door-way, and her figure was backed by the brightly lighted cottage kitchen. She had come to look out into the wet night for her husband, whose return was later than usual; and, when she saw

the gamekeeper and his son, she called out to ask what news they had.

" He's gotten off, I can tell ye, for I saw him not an hour ago stalking over the moor, and he gave me good-even!" replied Aaron, looking over his shoulder at his wife; and then turning to Kit, he asked the particulars of the trial.

" It ain't the weather to talk now," sharply said Geoffry; " we ha' to gang up to the Priory to tell my lady, and there ain't a dry thread on either of us; so good night to you."

They pushed their horses on, and rode up the wide beech avenue, across the Chase. Presently they could descry the lights in the windows of the house; and making for the door of the offices, dismounted.

They were instantly admitted, for the clatter of their horses' feet had been heard for some time, and more than one person was eagerly waiting for the information they brought. The woman who opened the door had not ushered them half way to the kitchen before the " boy in buttons," transformed now into a resplendent " plush," came from the

dining-room to say that the Meynells were to go to his lady immediately. Not giving the men time to dry their garments, but merely to doff their caps and over-coats, he led the way to the Oriel room, where Miss Talbot was waiting. She was standing by the fire-place, drawn up to her full height, tapping the floor impatiently with her foot. Her eyes turned full on Kit as he entered.

"Well?" she said, with a half smile at their embarrassment.

"Winsome Willie war at Houghton afore us, my lady," said the old man.

"What! you cannot mean to say that they have acquitted him!" almost angrily exclaimed Miss Talbot, advancing a step nearer to them, her eyes kindling and her colour rising.

"That's just what they've done: some flaw. He's gotten off, however, that I do know, and Aaron Lee see him coming over the moor a bit ago," continued Kit, sturdily.

"Kit Meynell, you have served the Talbots for fifty years; it is hard they cannot

protect you—or avenge you!" said Miss Talbot, bitterly.

"Oh, my lady! never heed me," said the old man, touched by this unexpected manifestation of her personal interest in himself.

"But I do heed you, Kit Meynell: and I say that man shall not roam the country,—he shall not!" said Maude.

Kit was silent, for his lady spoke passionately,—talking wild, as he internally remarked. After a few miuutes, she bade them go to the kitchen for some refreshment; she should hear all particulars from Mr Wylie on the morrow.

"My lady took it uncommon easy for her," whispered Geoffry to his father, as they threaded the passages leading back to the kitchen.

"Uncommon!" returned Kit, smiling.

There was the story to repeat to the conclave assembled in the kitchen; Mrs Mellow, mellower by age; the magnificent Johnny, Saunders, condescending in his curiosity, and a troop of minor personages, listened in great disappointment to their story. It was past

twelve o'clock when the two men issued once more from the hospitable doors of the Priory, to wend their way homewards through the night.

The rain had not abated in the least, and there was a loud wind groaning amongst the upper branches of the old trees. They were obliged now to ride more slowly, for the narrow path they took, after quitting the more open part of the Chase, was a steepish descent. Their lodge was visible to them from a light in a window which glimmered through the slanting rain, and shewed the welcome end to their weary ride.

"Mistress Goodhugh has all right inside!" observed Geoffry, as they turned the corner, and came in front of the house.

As he spoke, the door opened, and the old woman appeared with a lanthorn in her hand.

"Don't come out into the wet: I'll fetch t' lantern, mistress," shouted Geoffry, dismounting.

He had barely finished his sentence, when a sharp crack close beside him made him reel against the little gate. As he recovered the

shock, he saw his father sinking sideways from his horse; he rushed forward and received him in his arms—dead! At that moment Winsome Willie went deliberately bye.

"Aint we even now, Geff. Meynell?" he asked; and almost before Geoffry could see his sneering dark face, he had sped up the hill like a deer, and was gone. Mistress Goodhugh had rushed out with her lantern, and she turned its light on Kit's face.

"May be he aint much hurt: carry him in and lay him on the bed," said the old woman. Geoffry did so. Nurse, with one hand, raised the white hair, wet with blood, and displayed a small round wound in the temple. Geoffry sat down, and buried his face in his hands. Goodhugh rested her hand on his shoulder.

"Thou'lt have time to sorrow enow, lad: but away, get help to take the man who has killed him!—do'st hear?" said she. Geoffry rose up heavily, but the sight of his father's white, murdered face changed his mood.

"I will send some one to you: I must not let him escape," he said.

"Send no one—no women-kind; I aint feared," said nurse, stoutly.

In another ten minutes Geoffry stood at the side-door of the Priory once more. All was still; everybody, it seemed, was a-bed; for all the front of the house was dark, but one flickering light in an upper room remote from the offices. He knocked and battered till he was tired; but he had disturbed Rouser in his kennel, who was giving tongue most savagely. After five minutes there was a cautious undoing of bolts and bars, and the voice of Saunders demanded who was there.

"It is I—Geoffry Meynell," said the young man. The door was opened immediately.

"What's amiss?" asked Saunders. Geoffry's blanched face, and the stains on his clothes, would have been sufficient answer; but he said bitterly—"Winsome Willie don't miss his aim twice: who can you spare to go after him with me? John is a brave fellow."

"John's the man for you!" said that individual coming forward, busily engaged in putting on some garments. A bell rang through the house clear and startling.

"My lady's bell!" said Saunders; "who will go to her?" "Not I;" and "Not I;" said the voices of the many servants who had clustered down into the hall.

As Johnny and three other men-servants left the house with Geoffry, Saunders himself went up stairs: he met Aimée hurrying in the same direction. To her he gave his information, and then he returned to the hall. Two men immediately set out for the cottage in the glen; and Saunders, dismissing the agitated females to their repose, sat down in the hall to await the return of Johnny from the pursuit. Aimée entered her mistress's apartment with blanched face, and all trembling. Miss Talbot sat by the fire of her dressing-room, wrapped in a loose, white gown; it was evident she had not yet sought her pillow, for books and writing materials were on a table at her side, and her fingers grasped a pen in which the ink was not yet dry. Aimée paused irresolute at the door.

"What has occurred? What is the reason of this disturbance?" she demanded, lifting her eyes to the agitated countenance of her maid.

"Oh, ma'am! poor Meynell's been shot,

going in at his own door!" gasped Aimée, bringing her clasped hands on a level with her eyes. Miss Talbot started from her seat, threw the pen she held on the table, and stood fronting Aimée with a face white as her own. It was some time before she could speak.

"Fools!—A pretty pass has justice come to when it lets loose a murderer to complete his unfinished crime! Poor Meynell! there went the last servant my father knew when he was young! Poor Kit! You shall be avenged this time! Tell Saunders I want to speak to him."

Aimée disappeared, and in a few minutes Saunders rapped at the door.

"Come in!" Saunders entered.

"How was it?" asked Miss Talbot.

"Young Geoffry was in too great haste, ma'am, to say much, for he hoped to take Winsome Willie before he could get out of the country."

"You have sent information to the police at Salford?"

"No, ma'am: two of the men are with Geoffry, and two are gone down the glen."

"Let somebody saddle a horse and set out instantly for Salford. The man must have no possible outlet of escape: Meynell shall not be unavenged. If there is nobody else who dares to go, go yourself, and tell Mr Wylie he must ride over during the day, as early as possible. I attribute the former failure of conviction to him." Saunders withdrew.

"Maude, darling, what are you all up at this time of night for?" asked a soft voice from the inner room.

"Come here, sweet one, since we have awakened you, and I will tell you," replied Miss Talbot.

A tall, slender shape, draped in white from head to the tiny bare feet, came noiselessly over the floor to her side, with eager, questioning eyes, and a loud throbbing heart. Maude told her the fatal occurrence of the night. Lettice was horror struck, and sank into her chair pale and trembling, while the tears rolled down her cheeks.

"He will be taken—his crime will bring him to the scaffold: that is the only consolation I can feel for Meynell's loss. There

shall be no flaw this time; no want of funds to bring the murderer to punishment!" said Maude, her white cheek flushing with passion.

"Oh! sister, don't speak so—pray don't!"

"Why, Lettice, you would not have him escape?"

"His conscience will be his severest punishment; remember poor Nancy his mother. Oh, Maude! don't think of revenge!"

"You are talking positive nonsense, Lettice, as if I could either condemn him or pardon him. Thank God, the law relieves one of all personal responsibility in these cases, and I do hope justice will not be defeated!"

"Ah, Maude! think of his poor mother!"

"I do think of her—I will think of her! What then? I shall not stay the pursuit after her son—probably taken by this time. If he escape, I shall even offer a reward for his apprehension. I shall spare neither effort nor expense in the matter."

"Maude, is not this revenge?"

"No, Lettice; it is retribution, and it is justice."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE ORIEL CHAMBER.

THE morning after the event related in our last chapter, Miss Talbot was abroad betimes. She had walked to the glen, and seen the remains of her faithful servant—a sight which had raised the fever of her indignation to passion. She had been over to Hillside, and seen Winsome Willie's mother crouching by the fireside of her wretched home, sullen and grief-overpowered. She had seen the men out on the search for the murderer; and, at ten o'clock, she was sitting at her writing-table, preparing memoranda of business for her agent.

Maude Talbot was not the bright, gay creature of seven years ago. She looked older

than she really was by ten years at least. Her dress was not less careful, perhaps; but it was all of a dark hue, as if she had put on mourning for her dead youth, and was resolved to wear it all her life. It was rich in material, and well-fashioned; but it gave one the idea of a woman who had practically renounced in her own person all the pomps and vanities of the world. Her hair had become darker, and was brushed away from the face, fully revealing the good, though sharpened outline. There was no freshness about the pale skin, no light in her steady eye, which had at times a far-off wavering look. Her figure was erect, but haughty in its erectness; there was a stern self-assertion in the carriage of her small head, and a mixture of impatience and obstinacy in the compression of the lips.

A studious avoidance of ornament and luxury was observable about all that immediately concerned her. No ring sparkled on her slender veined hand; no blooming flowers or statuette adorned her table. The French clock had given place to a steady-going, plain-faced timepiece, of English manufacture. The piano was

closed; the books of favourite music were put away on a shelf out of reach. Floss had departed, leaving no successor to his throne and honours; and the pretty child who had made light in the Oriel Chamber, was grown into a tender, earnest-hearted woman.

While Maude sat and wrote, Lettice looked over the columns of a just-arrived morning paper.

Lettice did not equal the resplendent beauty of her sister in her best days; she was not so tall, not so majestically formed: but her lithe, pliant figure was grace itself. Her face—what matter for its features; they were small and delicate—her face "was as the face of an angel." Somehow you could not, in looking at her, picture to yourself that countenance of purity and peace, darkening with worldly experiences, or fading with time. You thought, "there is one of heaven's favourites." Everybody loved her—every living thing loved her.

It would have been strange had it been otherwise. She was herself so gentle, so loving, so tender of others. She was Maude's

only joy; almost her only thought; all her ambition. She sat there in the high-backed chair, which had replaced the luxurious couch, with her long golden tresses drooping to her bosom; her cheek somewhat paler from her broken rest of the night before; and now and then a tear glittering on her eyelashes, as she suffered her thoughts to wander to the bereaved son and the thrice-bereaved mother.

The journal she held was but carelessly glanced at, and at last it fell from her hand altogether. The rustling of the paper made Maude look up from the letter she was sealing.

"If you have finished with the paper, Letty, give it to me: I should like to see it before Mr Wylie comes. He ought not to be long now," said she.

Lettice gave her sister the journal, and then sat down again to look out into the garden. A sort of gasping sigh recalled her attention to Maude a few minutes after.

"What is it, Maude, darling? Are you ill? This dreadful excitement has been too

much for you!" she exclaimed, going across the room towards her.

"It is nothing—nothing, my darling!" replied her sister, softly.

Maude's voice was soft to nobody now, save her precious Lettice. But Lettice remained by her with her arm round her neck, looking over her shoulder at the paper, of which Maude seemed to be diligently employed in perusing a leading article. Something caught her eye.

"What, Maude, look there! our old acquaintance, Philip Warburton, raised to the peerage — Viscount Elmsdale!" she exclaimed, pointing to a paragraph at the top of one of the columns. Maude's eye raised itself, and wandered along the lines: she did not say that she had seen it before, and that it was this had caused her regretful sigh.

"I know no man will grace a coronet better," said she at last, returning to her former study of the leading article.

"Is that all you have to say about him, Maude? Oh, what good friends we once were!" returned Lettice, in an accent of reproach; "I

do wish the Manor-House were open again; but I suppose he will be a greater man now than ever! Don't you admire his character, Maude? don't you think him truly noble?"

"He is in earnest—he is no sham, of which there are so many now-a-days; but I admired him more as Philip Warburton, than I shall do as Viscount Elmsdale:—he did not need a title to make him honoured!"

"No! everybody knows Philip Warburton's name—he always will be Philip Warburton with the people: it has almost passed into a proverb for good faith and disinterestedness. I wish his title may not hurt him in men's esteem. I wonder whether Lupa is flourishing still?"

Maude was either too deeply interested in the Free Trade question, or she was too preoccupied with her own thoughts to prolong the conversation. Lettice soon after glided unobserved from the room, and took her way to the old school-room, still consecrated to quietness and Miss Sedley.

There sat Miriam, busily plying her embroidery needle,—as busily and as ingeniously

as when she worked in the Ladies' Hospital at Salford. She looked up as her favourite pupil entered; and after their morning kiss was exchanged, Lettice drew a chair, and ensconced herself at the other side of the frame opposite her old governess. Her fingers were in a few minutes industriously occupied in getting into a still more hopeless state of entanglement a party-coloured mass of wools, which Miriam had thrown upon the frame as she entered.

Their first talk was of the dreadful event of the preceding night, and from that they diverged through various channels, till the conversation was brought to a point more interesting to at least one of the two—namely, the return of Mr Gower, now colonel of the regiment in which he went out to India an ensign.

Death, and the fortune of war, make promotion quick in our Eastern possessions; and the brave young officer, thanks to an iron constitution, and an overwatching Providence, returned to England scatheless; if we except a gash across the back of the left hand, and a cut across the temple—not disfiguring to his

bold manly type of countenance—which were received in his second year of service.

To Miss Sedley, Lettice Talbot had long been accustomed to confide all her troubles, real or imaginary; neither had she withheld the communication of her many joys—far, far overbalancing the number of her griefs. In the grave and now elderly governess she had always found a ready listener, a cheerful sympathiser, and better than all, a sensible adviser.

Notwithstanding this customary friendliness of intercourse, there grew up in Lettice's heart, now that Colonel Gower had really returned home, a feeling of delicacy in alluding to him as she had done. Lettice began to feel a trembling suspicion in her heart that he might not have thought of her, whom he left a child, as she had never ceased to think of him. Another fear withheld her: might it not seem unfeeling to be thinking of such a trifling matter as the coming to England of an old acquaintance, who had perhaps forgotten her, when her sister's and father's oldest servant lay dead—murdered—scarcely five hundred yards from where she sat? Miss Sedley saved Lettice the difficulty

of broaching the subject, round which she had been fencing for some minutes, by an abrupt question.

"By the bye, Lettice," said she, "has Mr Evelyn given you any Indian news lately? Oh! I forgot you read the papers for yourself now."

"Colonel Gower's regiment is gazetted as landed at Portsmouth last Thursday," replied Lettice, smiling.

"Then we shall soon see him again. What a remarkably fine youth he was," remarked Miss Sedley, looking up brightly in her companion's face.

"Colonel Gower ought to know that his coming has power to charm your grave lips to a smile. I shall tell him!" exclaimed the girl, laughing archly.

"It was not for him only I felt glad."

Lettice blushed, and bent her face down till her long tresses swept the embroidery frame, at the accent Miss Sedley threw into her reply; suddenly raising it again, and pushing back the drooping ringlets hastily, she exclaimed with a tremulous motion of the lip,

which Miss Sedley could not fail to see and understand.

"When, perhaps, he has not once thought of Houghton!"—she would not say "of me."

"You do not think so, foolish child!" said Miss Sedley, half laughing, half reproachful.

Lettice was silent, turning her face to the window. Miriam plied her needle as if her daily bread were still to be earned by it; and so they remained for ten minutes.

"There is Mr Wylie riding up the avenue. No; it cannot be Mr Wylie—is it? it looks taller. Who can it be?" murmured Lettice, indolently, at length.

"Who can it be?" echoed Miriam, looking up from her frame. "Who can it be but—"

"Lennox Gower!" exclaimed Lettice, rising impetuously, and throwing up the window.

Miriam would have checked her; for the sound had caused the young Colonel to raise his eyes to that part of the house: but the deed was done, and the young girl looked so joyous, so happy, that Miss Sedley could not damp her delight by expatiating on the impropriety of which she seemed totally unconscious; so

Lettice waved her hand from the window, and then danced down into the Hall to be the first to greet her returned friend. Maude also had seen his approach, and was coming from the Oriel-room, her hand pressed to her aching forehead. As Lettice passed the door, she drew her into the drawing-room, and said a word or two about her exuberant delight, which had the effect of moderating it; for her greeting to Colonel Gower was constrained and cold, quite irreconcileable with the welcome waved to him from the school-room windows.

The Colonel, however, did not seem to notice it, and sat down on the chair indicated by Maude near her own, with the air of being perfectly content with his reception; although the way in which Miss Talbot received him was more grand than cordial. Her stiffness wore off, however, before his imperturbable good humour and self-possession. He was not the man to be awed by the pomp and circumstance of wealth. Poor himself, he always maintained a disregard of the halo that encircles the merely rich; and his habits of commanding

men, meeting danger, overcoming difficulty,—early gained, gave to his character a firmness, and to his manner a decision, that quietly but completely overbore the fence within which the Lady of Houghton at first seemed inclined to intrench herself. In less than a quarter of an hour he was chatting as freely with the two sisters as if it were the Christmas-day of long ago, when Lettice lifted her face to be kissed by the beardless ensign.

"You are staying with Mr Tempest?" said Maude, interrogatively.

"Yes; I arrived yesterday only, and I found my uncle suffering from a severe fit of the gout. This morning, when I mentioned my intention of riding over here, he seemed annoyed. Have you offended him, Miss Lettice? But pacification followed close on the heels of vexation, when I promised to make inquiries as to the truth of the dreadful reports which have been blown over the hills this morning respecting your head-gamekeeper. I see from your face, Miss Talbot, they are true."

"It is true that Meynell lies in his lodge

murdered—murdered by a man who was acquitted at Salford this very week on a charge of attempted murder," replied Maude, bitterly. "There is something faulty about our criminal laws, to let a man like that loose to finish his intended crime."

Colonel Gower shook his head.

"Nothing like martial law—nothing like martial law!" he said, in a tone that had an accent of severity in it.

Lettice raised her eyes timidly to the dark, somewhat stern face of the soldier: he saw the thought in her mind, and answered to it instantly.

"What ladies of tender dispositions would call mercy, I should stigmatize as cruelty to society in general—the sacrifice of scores to save one: discipline must be maintained," he said.

Lettice smiled: what could she do else? She could not argue—she never could—and she was not convinced.

"Here comes one whom I must see immediately—Mr Wylie. You must excuse me, Colonel Gower; you and Lettice should have

many experiences to exchange. You will remain to luncheon. I shall see you again," said Maude, rising and going towards the door. As she opened it, Rouser bounded in and across the room to Lettice. The elder sister passed out and shut the door.

"What! Rouser! fine fellow!" exclaimed Colonel Gower, caressing the rough head of the noble animal. "How shall I thank you, Lettice, for being so kind to my old friend?" Rouser yielded gratefully to the hand of his former master; he seemed, indeed, to recognize his touch and his voice.

"You must not make him forswear his allegiance to me; he is always my companion in the long walks I love to take," replied Lettice. "Maude rides often—more frequently than I care to do; and Miss Sedley cannot take such rambles as I used to tease her into doing when I was a child."

"When you were a child!" repeated Colonel Gower musingly, looking at the fair face which bent blushing under his eye; "When you were a child: it is not so long ago, Lettice. Poor Somerset spoke of you the very last

night we spent together. He said: 'If bonnie birdie,—that was the name you went by with him—'if bonnie birdie were here, how frightened she would be!' We had had an alarm of ghosts. You remember your penchant for the supernatural."

"Oh! yes; but why do you say poor Somerset: is he dead?" asked Lettice.

"We left him on the field after a trifling skirmish, in which we were worsted: he fell in the very first charge; so he had a soldier's death, which was all his ambition," replied the Colonel.

Lettice's eyes glittered through the tears that filled them, and she stooped down over Rouser to hide her emotion. Gower softly stroked her hair, as he had done when she was a child.

"I wept for him myself, Lettice; he was my best friend," he said. "There were many who wept for him, both here and where he died. There are few men who so well deserve the regrets of relations or companions as did Captain Somerset. For months and months I regretted, not so much his death,—

that was honourable, and the fortune of war—but the necessity we were under to leave him to be despoiled by those Affghans, and perhaps to find no grave at all. It was a regret he himself would have laughed at; but it haunted me a long time."

"Do you remain long with Mr Tempest?" asked Lettice, after a considerable pause.

"For some weeks. My leave of absence is for a year, however; but my own family will claim me. I hope to see much of you, Lettice, whilst I am here. Do you still permit me to be your good friend?" asked the officer, in a lowered voice.

"Oh, yes! don't change, pray!" exclaimed Lettice, with a smile and a blush. "Those were such merry times long ago. If we could never grow old!"

"We should weary of our youth," replied Gower. "We should call it flat, stale, and unprofitable."

"No, no, I should not, for I am always happy. Old age is not enviable."

"Perhaps not always: but it may not come to either you or I; so do not let it cast its shadow

before: that would be little wisdom indeed. Is Mr Evelyn still living — still planted amongst his folios and ponderous tomes?"

"Yes; he still flourishes, and you shall see him. For years he kept me *au fait* of all the Indian news: you were not forgotten."

"Neither were you, bonnie birdie!"

"Shall we go and see him now?—And there is Miss Sedley."

"Miss Sedley is sunning herself on the terrace; we will join her by and bye. Tell me of your foreign travels—where you went, what you did, what you saw, and how you liked every thing."

"Well, we went every where, and saw every thing, with my fancy for guide."

"An excellent guide too—where could you find a better, or one likely to lead you such a chase?" said Colonel Gower, smiling archly at his young friend.

"Ah! you and Miss Sedley are of the same opinion, I see, so I shall not tell you where we went—hundreds—thousands of miles!"

"Then perhaps you will tell me the proceedings of our mutual friends who were at

that Christmas gathering, which you and I remember—first, the Clares."

"Sir James and lady Clare are growing old respectably, being worried by their eldest daughter, Sara, in a very proper degree: Juliet, you know, married little Lord Linnet—they have a small family of six children. Ada married Lord Whimper last autumn: Mr Grandiose is made Dean of Chesterton, and is become a very great man indeed with the High Church party. Mr Warburton—you remember Mr Warburton?"

"By name only—personally, he is unknown to me."

"I recollect: he was not with us that Christmas—it was the Christmas before: well! he has been Prime Minister; but he soon resigned, and now he has been raised to the peerage, under the title of Viscount Elmsdale. He is a very popular man, but I am afraid he is working himself to death. He never comes down to the Manor House now, but lives entirely in London."

"Great men have not time to cultivate the domestic virtues."

"It is a great pity then; for Philip Warburton seemed made to be a fine country gentleman, and not a public drudge."

"He is not—if I understand his character correctly from his writings and his public measures—the man to be happy or content to spend an inactive life: he seems made for a politician."

"Ah! if you knew him! But he may be changed. He was a great favourite of mine. We have never met since before we went abroad; but his name has been constantly before the world, so we could not forget him if we would. He was such a good son, and such a benevolent landlord: not that I mean to class those virtues as gone by—no doubt they still exist, for his tenants are the most orderly and contented of the neighbourhood."

"I wish then he would communicate the secret of his management to my uncle Tempest, for I cannot pay his people a similar compliment."

"Shall we join Miss Sedley on the terrace? You can at the same time renew your acquaintance with Mr Evelyn: he always creeps

out for half an hour in the middle of the day, and my governess usually bears him company. Shall we go?"

"Assuredly: will you not cover these bright locks though? The sun is powerful," said Colonel Gower, seeing that Lettice was about to step from one of the windows that opened to the ground, without any covering on her head.

"Oh, no! I never put on a bonnet for a stroll in the garden; but here is a lace handkerchief which will serve the purpose as well: the sun never scorches my face," replied Lettice, laughing, as she threw the thin black lace over her head, and knotted it under her chin. There was no intentional coquetry in the action, but it formed a very graceful coiffure,—at least in Colonel Gower's eyes. He shook his head gravely, however.

"Wilful and wild as ever, I see," he observed, looking down into the smiling eyes.

"Wild if you will—but no—not wilful with those I love!" exclaimed Lettice, earnestly answering his look with a timid shy air.

"May I rank myself with those favoured

ones?" whispered Gower, drawing her hand quietly through his arm.

Lettice blushed, but she did not repel the familiarity.

"You do not answer me, Lettice; speak!"

"Yes, yes! were you not always my friend, ever since I was a wee child, and you rescued me from Sir James Clare's great mastiff, Tartar?" replied the young girl hastily, as they passed through the window and descended to the terrace.

No opportunity was there then to continue so interesting a conversation, for Cyrus Evelyn and Miss Sedley were at the foot of the flight of steps. The old librarian raised his hat, as his custom was, to his fair young mistress, and then looked earnestly at Colonel Gower. The moment the officer spoke, Cyrus Evelyn recognised him, and gave him a hearty greeting, as much for Lettice's sake as for his own. It was the same with Miriam Sedley; she was obliged to turn away hastily to conceal the emotion Colonel Gower's appearance caused her. She was so pleased on her dear pupil's account that he looked every inch

one of nature's aristocrats, and her eye had instantly detected the terms on which they already stood towards each other. She felt that now, perhaps, the welcome waved from the school-room window, was less an indiscretion than she had been inclined to fear.

Colonel Gower was not likely to be hard in his judgment on one whom he regarded with such evident favour. And as Miriam fell behind the trio, she busied her mind in castle-building, for the happiness of those two, so evidently destined for each other.

There was another who took cognizance of this understanding between Lettice and Colonel Gower—Cyrus Evelyn. But he drew no auguries for good from it. His own experience led him to doubt the possibility of a happy termination to any human love; and, for these two especially, he foresaw difficulties and troubles without number. But he was not the man to express his opinions, whatever they might be, unless required.

He knew the pride of Maude Talbot: he only of all the world, besides the actors therein, knew how much she had sacrificed to it. He

could not see that succeeding years had done anything towards softening her haughty spirit; and he saw, or imagined he saw, in that temper of the elder sister, an insurmountable barrier to the happiness of Lettice in her love.

Whilst this *partie carré* was promenading the terrace, Miss Talbot and Mr Wylie were closetted in the Oriel-room. They were seated at opposite sides of the writing-table in the business corner, and the lady was listening with such eager interest to her steward's communication, that she never observed the four individuals who passed and repassed the window several times.

The lawyer's smooth, well-shaven face shone with satisfaction as he made the statement which so fixed Miss Talbot's attention; and he had the acuteness to see that he was giving her actual pleasure by prolonging his details; so, after announcing the main fact of the capture of Winsome Willie, he went on to tell her the how, the when, and the where, with the most circumstantial detail.

"Yes, madam, he is fully committed for trial!" he began; "fully committed for trial

on the charge of wilful murder! He will stand his trial at the next winter assize. Its termination it is not difficult to foresee."

Each word, as Mr Wylie delivered it, was dwelt on with an unctuous precision, as if he were gloating over the image his words conjured up. Miss Talbot made him a sign to go on, holding her breath; her colour coming and going in her anxiety to hear how the capture had been effected.

Mr Wylie went on:—"He — Winsome Willie, as he is popularly called—William Abbot, as I call him—was not an easy capture by any means. The man knows as well as we do that he has committed a suicidal act—positively and deliberately put his neck in the noose for the sake of revenge—and he defended himself as nobody but a man defending his life would. His strength is gigantic, and his resolution equals it.

"Young Jefferson, and those with him, tracked him from his mother's house at Hillside across the moor. The ground was wet, and his shoes were peculiarly nailed. They came on him suddenly in a clump over to the

north near Salford. He had intended, in all probability, to make for the town; though his conspicuous appearance would have insured speedy detection.

"Directly Willie espied them—for he saw them first, it seems—he attempted to run, and his swiftness of foot would have given them a long chase, but an unlucky stone lay in his way; he stumbled—fell—but rose instantly, unhurt. This accident gave his pursuers an advantage; and, the next minute, young Jefferson, who is not much his inferior in either size or strength, had seized him by the collar. Willie made a lounge at him with a great clasp-knife; but Jefferson's thick velveteen-jacket saved him from the crime of a double murder.

"After a fierce struggle, Willie was overpowered; and the police from Salford, who were also out on the search, coming up at the time, he was mounted on one of their horses, and so conveyed to the inn at Eversleigh, where a chaise was procured, and the party drove off to Salford. He was examined before the magistrates at once. They were sit-

ting when he was brought in, and, by half-past eleven o'clock, Willie the Winsome was lodged in the gaol. He preserved the reckless air which distinguished him throughout his previous trial. He was not insolent; and, when he saw that resistance against his capture was useless, he went quietly enough, but with a defiant look, as if he dared the fate which he had made inevitable. He refused to speak a word when he was examined, and watched the witnesses, especially the son of the murdered man, with seeming interest.

"As soon as I had heard the committal I came away, and never drew rein until I saw Houghton. I knew your anxiety; but I delayed purposely to bring the news, for which, I was aware, you must be thirsting. Your man, Saunders, is a good messenger in an emergency: he routed up all the officials in an incredibly short space of time."

The sound of a bell echoing through the house made Mr Wylie pause. Miss Talbot drew a deep breath and rose.

"I thank you for your promptness, Mr Wylie," she observed. "I could not have

rested with the knowledge that the man who had deprived me of a faithful servant was free and at large. That bell was to announce luncheon: come and take some refreshment; your long, hasty ride must have made it necessary."

So saying, Miss Talbot left the Oriel-room, and descended the stair-case, closely followed by her man-of-business.

Mr Wylie's bland countenance waxed blander still, in the happy certainty that his wealthy employer's favour was restored to him by his diligence in this important affair; and he ate his luncheon with excellent appetite.

Miss Maude Talbot, [illegible] somewhat less [illegible] with the subject of her long conversation with Mr Wylie, she could scarcely have [illegible] the [illegible] which ap-[illegible] her sister and [illegible] mind was [illegible] her eyes [illegible] with [illegible] as she had

finished the morsel of chicken to which she had been helped, she slightly apologised to Colonel Gower, and, bidding Mr Wylie seek her when he had ended his repast, she returned to the Oriel-room.

Lettice Talbot had a strong, though not very well-defined aversion to Mr Wylie, and she never, by any chance, exchanged a word with him when it was possible to avoid it; so, not finding the company very congenial, the lawyer, as speedily as was consistent with his dignity, replenished his inner man, and, bowing to the two whom he left, took his way to Miss Talbot's business apartment.

"That man is my favourite aversion," said Lettice, as soon as the door closed after him.

Gower laughed.

"You appear to have an aversion to many things, usually considered proper, respectable, and orthodox," he returned. "Mr Wylie looks very sleek, and externally amiable; there is almost an air of sanctity in his bald pate. Pray, what is it about the poor man that has excited your dislike?"

"He is so fair-faced to Maude, so obsequi-

rested with the knowledge that the man who had deprived me of a faithful servant was free and at large. That bell was to announce luncheon : come and take some refreshment; your long, hasty ride must have made it necessary."

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Had Maude Talbot been somewhat less occupied with the subject of her long conversation with Mr Wylie, she could scarcely have failed to observe the close intimacy which appeared to be forming between her sister and Colonel Gower. Filled as her mind was, however, with this one absorbing idea, the meal passed over without her raising her eyes from her plate, or exchanging a word with either of her guests; and, as soon as she had

finished the morsel of chicken to which she had been helped, she slightly apologised to Colonel Gower, and, bidding Mr Wylie seek her when he had ended his repast, she returned to the Oriel-room.

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"He is so fair-faced to Maude, so obsequi-

ous, so almost fawning; and the people, the villagers, and the farmers hate him," said Lettice, as harshly as it was possible for her to speak. "He makes Maude do hard things, —things which would never come into her head. He raises the rents of the cottagers' little gardens; he has enclosed a piece of waste land which they had for their cows; he has made Mr Tempest quarrel with Maude about some right of way through the Chase, which he has persuaded her to have closed: though it does not matter in the least to Maude. As Mr Tempest opposed her, and she thinks it is hers to do as she will, she stands up for her right; and instead of taking a short cut across the Chase, the Eversleigh people have to go round by the road, when they come to work at any of the places hereabout, and all the people beyond the hills take the lower road to Salford market, which is considerably longer. It is a very unpopular measure of Maude's; but it is *her right.* Mr Wylie has persuaded her, and so she has been firm to maintain it. That is the cause of Mr Tempest's annoyance at your coming over. Indeed, I think the

quarrel between Maude and him is irreparable."

"It shall not prevent my coming: I rode across the Chase—Selim does not mind a fence—and we both greatly prefer the green sward to the dusty white road in summer weather. I hope your imperial sister has not given orders to her people to seize upon trespassers," said Colonel Gower, laughing.

"If she has, I will endeavour to have an exception made in your favour," replied Lettice.

"Do! I should not like to be brought up before my uncle on so ignominious a charge, especially during the continuance of his attack of gout; for though it is scarcely respectful to make such an observation, his temper is very acrimonious at present."

"Probably your sentence would be light if your offence were against his enemy and opponent, Maude."

"No! nothing of the sort! it would be doubly severe: my uncle piques himself on the strict justice he metes out to everybody. If your sister could sit on the bench beside him, they would be very Brutuses for impartiality."

"Then I will use my influence for you to come by the Chase instead of the road."

"How often, Lettice?"

"As often as you will: I am always glad to see old friends, and we were such firm allies."

"Thanks for the permission—do you ride? you ought to ride."

"I am timid; but I do ride sometimes: not often. Maude goes so far when we set off together, that I am ready to faint with weariness when we get back home. Sometimes I believe she forgets, for she will ride miles without speaking, and never turns till she is half-worn out herself."

"If I might persuade you to let me be your attendant— "

"There is nothing I should like so much—nothing: we will ask Maude."

"Then I will come to-morow morning, Lettice!"

She promised to be ready by noon, if Maude permitted her to ride. She never had ridden, except with her sister: Maude never trusted her out of her sight on horseback. With this hope Gower was obliged to depart, for

Miss Talbot did not reappear; and about four o'clock, he took his way back across the Chase, and Lettice went to her own room to meditate and rejoice.

CHAPTER XIV.

A PROVINCIAL MILLINERY ESTABLISHMENT.

Everything now-a-days is different from what it was in the days of our grandfathers: even milliners' shops are shops no more; they are depôts, or establishments, or *magasins des modes.* Miss Crookes designated herself Milliner to her Majesty and the Royal Family—for what reason nobody knew. It was not recorded in the archives of the then existing dynasty, headed by Miss Plows, that they had made either bib, or tucker, or any other article of female attire for any member of the blood-royal. Miss Crookes, though long past the meridian of life, feigned an interesting juvenility, which caused one of her young

people, who had exchanged the *métier* of governess for that of milliner, as being the less arduous vocation of the two, satirically to suggest that she founded her claim to her distinguishing title, on having manufactured rosettes of white satin ribbon for the favourers of the young Pretender, when he passed through Salford on his ill-fated expedition to Derby. However the truth might be, on a flaming board of bright azure, in gilt letters a foot high, Miss Crookes proclaimed herself to the inhabitants and visitors of Salford, "Milliner and Dressmaker to her Majesty and the Royal Family."

Her shop-front, or, as I should say, her show-room window, was wide and handsome. Within, the articles exhibited were always of a choice and select character, from the damsels behind the counter, downwards. To this much-coveted position, our little friend Jessie Jefferson was preferred, about a month after she entered the establishment—Miss Plows having vacated the post, and transformed herself into Mrs Jackson, sooner than was expected.

Jessie's promotion had excited jealousy and heart-burning amongst the other nymphs of the counter, as well as amongst those whose longer services in the work-room seemed to give them a better title to the comparative idleness of the show-room.

Jessie's first appearance in Miss Plows' place was the signal for the infliction of innumerable slights, which one pretty woman so well knows how to inflict upon another. The young person who had till then held the palm for beauty was not pleased at seeing herself likely to be deposed from her throne.

"She is not ugly, to be sure," said this young person, Bella Grimstone by name, in a loud whisper to her friend Jane Writhe; "but she is such an unformed little thing: she has neither air nor *tournure*, and her rosy cheeks are not to my fancy at all."

"What an idea, too, to wear all those fly-away ringlets!" returned Jane, stroking down her own smooth bands of black hair; "I wonder Miss Crookes will allow them: I should think she wont, when she finds out how long it takes her to curl it in the morning."

"Miss Jefferson, does your hair curl naturally?" asked Miss Forster, the *ci-devant* governess, who was also in the show-room, less for her prettiness than for her knowledge of French, which enabled Miss Crookes to add to her other attractions the notification of "*Ici on parle Français.*"

"Yes, Miss Foster, it does," replied Jessie, shortly. She was not deficient in spirit when her personal charms were called in question; and as she had overheard the disparaging comments thereupon, she was internally fencing at the jealous depreciators. Miss Foster tossed her head, and cast a doubting glance at the ringlets in question. Jessie could not bear this; and to shew that they really were natural, she drew the whole mass through her two little hands, and then ruffled them up, letting her curls fall loose on her neck afterwards.

"Now, do you believe?" she demanded of her sceptical companions.

"Yes!" replied Miss Foster; "but I would advise you to pick up your combs, and get it made tidy, or woe betide you if Miss Crookes come in while you are in that pickle: she

would be ready to send you back to the work-room."

Jessie stooped down to pick up her combs, and as she did so, a heavy step came in at the door. The young milliner rose hastily, and with the deepest crimson suffusing her face, she recognised in the early customer Mr Frederick Linfoot. It was too late to leave the shop, and as he advanced gravely up to the counter by which she stood, she had no chance of escape. He did not shew any sign of recognition there, however: he asked for ladies' kid gloves. They were brought and spread before him; but he seemed to have much difficulty in fixing on the size and colour, having many more glances for the blushing face and dishevelled coiffure of Jessie than for his intended purchases. The entrance of two or three other persons drew off the lynx-eyed surveillance of the other girls, and then Mr Linfoot had an opportunity of transacting his real business.

"I have not seen you for an age, Jessie: I have watched for you all the week—how is it?" he asked in a hurried whisper, as he

turned over a new batch of light tinted kid gloves—"I even went so far as to knock at your door last night: but I suppose Nellie was out. I was afraid you were ill."

"No; but I sleep here, now Miss Plows is gone. I have Sunday out, that is all," replied Jessie in the same tone, with her eyes on the gloves. Mr Linfoot selected half a dozen pairs of light-coloured ones, and then asked for lace collars: over these also much whispered conversation was exchanged.

"Instead of going to St Grim's on Sunday afternoon with Nellie, be at the corner of the new esplanade by the river: I want to talk to you particularly. Promise!" said Frederick Linfoot, contriving to press Jessie's fingers under the pile of delicate lace which was laid on the counter between them. Jessie hesitated.

"Has your sister been talking against me once more? I thought you loved me better than to listen to anything now," he continued, in a lower tone.

"Oh Frederick! Nellie thinks only of my good," remonstrated the girl.

"Will it be for your good when she has

driven me from you ?" asked Frederick, fixing his eyes reproachfully on Jessie's face. She looked up startled.

"Oh, no!" she exclaimed, thrown off her guard by the possibility of such an event.

"Eight shillings, is it?" added Frederick indifferently, handling a collar; for he perceived Jessie's unwariness had drawn several pairs of eyes on them.

"I will take those two, and that handkerchief."

"Is there anything more this morning, sir?" asked Jessie, trembling, as she made a note of the purchases, and passed it to him.

"Nothing," shortly replied Mr Linfoot, turning his back and leaning against the counter, as he cast his eye over the note. "I will be there," was written beneath; and with a perfectly contented smile, he drew forth his purse, paid the amount, and crushed up the note in his hand.

Jessie asked where she should send the parcel to. He would take it; and receiving it from her hand with a grateful and significant glance, he turned on his heel and left the shop.

"Well, I never!" exclaimed Bella Grim-

stone, the moment his figure was out of sight; "you have made a conquest: that is Mr Linfoot of the Hardwicke factory. Dear! what did he buy? you seemed to have a great deal of talk."

"I declare, he has dropped the bill—careless fellow!" said Jane Writhe, stooping to pick it up as she crossed the floor. Jessie stretched out her hand eagerly to receive it—an action which excited Jane's curiosity. She was about to toss it into the fire; but seeing Jessie's trembling fingers longing to clutch it, she put it in her pocket as if she thought nothing about it; and Miss Crookes coming in at the moment, prevented any discussion.

Poor Jessie was in misery; she was sure that malicious Jane Writhe had seen her anxiety, and she was dreadfully afraid of what might be the result of her discovery. That she had made it was only too sure; for passing by her some little time after she whispered,—"Pray, what sort of an article may an 'I-will-be-there' be, and how much does it cost?" But as she spoke, she slipped the bit of paper into her hand. Jessie hastened to destroy it,

and she quailed whenever Jane's eyes met hers. The first opportunity that offered, she begged Jane to say nothing about it; to which Jane consented in the following terms:—"I'll say nothing about it if you wish it to be a secret; but most of the girls would think it something to boast of having such a handsome lover as Mr Linfoot: only, if I keep your secret, you must tell me all about it, and promise not to see anything I do under the rose."

The promise was given, but it was less easy to comply with the former part of the conditions. Jessie pleaded that her lover had pledged her to secrecy.

The plea was far from acceptable in the eyes of Miss Writhe, who tossed her head and gave various other symptoms of not choosing that affairs should continue on so unsatisfactory a footing, without Jessie having cause to repent her want of confidence. Jessie scarcely knew what to do; she did not wish to break her promise of secrecy to Mr Linfoot, neither did she wish Jane to communicate what she had discovered to their companions, and leave them to put on it what construction they would. So

she took a medium course; she gave Jane to understand that the handsome manufacturer was an admirer whom she had recently taken up, and that their intimacy was a secret to all the world but themselves. Jane listened, and thought Jessie a remarkably fortunate girl, and this half-confidence became a sort of bond of alliance between the young people. Jessie Jefferson could not have chosen a worse person to be admitted into her friendship; for, without principle herself, Jane had a peculiarly subtle way of undermining its strength in others.

Jane's flattery stirred Jessie's latent vanity into a flame; and after a few private conversations with her new companion, she began to feel a pride in having attracted the attention of such a man as Mr Frederick Linfoot, and to consider it an achievement to boast of: whereas, under Nellie's treatment of the subject, she had more than once been tempted to doubt whether the admiration and pursuit of a man so far her superior in station, were not rather an insult.

The secret, by some means or other, oozed

out after a few days, and Jessie had to sustain the questioning and cross-questioning of the envious Bella and of Miss Forster; neither of whom would have been indifferent to the conquest Jessie had made, though they privately confided to each other that they regarded her as a "forward, stuck-up minx."

After his first visit, Mr Linfoot frequently dropped into the shop during a quiet part of the evening, after the fashionable hours for shopping were over. The trouble of attending upon him was tacitly given over to Jessie; and Miss Crookes was conveniently blind, for his visits were always favourable in a pecuniary point of view, though all the things he bought soon found their way back to the fair seller.

Jane Writhe advised Jessie to keep these gifts a secret from her sister; this she was easily prevailed upon to do, for remonstrance was thus saved her; and as she never went home but on the Sunday, it was not difficult to keep up a system of concealment.

Nellie, if she had known of this, would have undoubtedly considered it her duty to speak

to her father about it; but, as Jessie's intimacy with Jane Writhe grew and strengthened, the necessity of telling her secrets to her sister was lessened, and there was no counteracting influence to weaken the power which vanity and Frederick Linfoot were rapidly gaining over her mind.

Mr Linfoot himself began to perceive this, and his affectionate attentions to the little milliner grew more open. It soon came to be a subject of comment in the workroom, in the absence of its object and Miss Crookes, whether it were likely to result in a marriage or not.

One of these comments Jessie accidentally overheard one Sunday morning, as she was dressing to go home, expecting to be joined by her lover on the way. Miss Forster, a shrewd girl after her fashion, was the speaker.

"Marry her!" she echoed, in a contemptuous tone, after some remark from Bella Grimstone; "marry her, indeed! as much as he means to marry you or me! *Passer le temps*: that's all he wants! Is there any man of sense

in the world, much more a man of delicacy, would expose a girl he meant to make his wife to our observation every day? Why, he does not make a pretence at concealment now! Jessie is a vain little fool; and if she does not mind what she's about, he'll make her a wicked little fool. It's all very well to flirt a bit, and to take presents given for the love of our *beaux yeux;* but to fall in love—and she is crazed after him—I call it perfect folly!"

Jessie, bitterly in her own heart, called the worldly-wise Miss Forster an "unfeeling creature," and thought that the love she despised was the only thing that was worth caring about. After turning over in her mind the doubts they had expressed as to Mr Linfoot's intentions with regard to herself, she came to the conclusion that they sprang from the hatred, malice, and uncharitableness of their hearts, and were not worth a care.

So she stood before her glass, and pranked herself out in the prettiest of muslin dresses, and the most becoming of tulle bonnets, with rosebuds underneath, and a pair

of Frederick's delicate gloves, and the most coquettish of silk mantles, and went out into the street, with a pleasant consciousness of being one of the very daintiest little women on whom that Sunday afternoon was shining.

Miss Crookes' establishment was in one of the most fashionable streets of Salford, a considerable distance from the part of the town where Jessie's father lived, and her walk was a long one. Her pace was quick until she came to the Bridge, the connecting link between the Old and New Towns, but then she slackened it.

The streets were very quiet, most of the people were either in church or chapel, and so the meeting of Mr Linfoot with the little milliner passed unnoticed.

Frederick had grown imperious, in his increased certainty of his power over Jessie. He drew her arm within his, and led her to the steps which, from one side of the river, descended to a narrow quay, where was moored a pleasure-boat, with a man half asleep on the benches.

"Where are we going?" asked Jessie, in some alarm, half withdrawing her arm.

"For a row on the river, darling! It is so warm; and I never can enjoy a walk on the Esplanade, we meet so many people. Come!" replied Frederick.

"I never was on the water in my life," remonstrated Jessie, still holding back.

"Never too late to learn!" responded Frederick, gently forcing her down the steps.

"Oh, Frederick! if Nellie knew," faintly said the poor girl.

"She is not likely to know, for I saw her go into St Grim's, ten minutes ago, with a tall country fellow, with whom she appeared on particularly intimate terms. She won't miss you, depend upon it."

And Jessie suffered herself to be placed in the boat, with Frederick beside her, and his arm resting on the ledge at her back.

For some time there was no room for any sensation but that of dread, in the novelty of her situation; but as they rowed further down the river, and left the dark houses behind, she began to experience a pleasurable

feeling, in the soft rippling of the water, the warm air, and the presence of her lover.

"You will not be such a timid little thing another time, Jessie, shall you?" said Frederick, bending down to look into her face, and speaking in the gentlest tone.

Jessie smiled, and shook her head, protesting she was more than half afraid yet.

"I often think, Jessie," continued Frederick, in a slightly reproachful voice, "I often think you only half love me. Perfect love implies perfect confidence; and I am afraid you do not trust me as you ought, or why should you have been afraid to come on the river with me,—as if I would lead you into any trouble."

Jessie bit her lip, and tried to keep back the ever-ready tears; but Frederick saw them, and threatened to kiss them away.

The discreet boatman whistled a tune, and looked anywhere but at his passengers.

Jessie's little heart could not bear to hear itself doubted, and her tears were a more eloquent refutation to Frederick's pretended

suspicions than the most earnest protestations could have been; so, after a slight fit of weeping and a few kisses, during a quiet stroll in the fields near the river, peace was restored; they returned to the boat, and were rowed homewards.

The sky had been overclouding for some time, as they rowed up the river; and when Jessie, with a feeling of safety, set her foot on the quay, the old boatman said to her, with a meaning look, "I'd advise you, Miss, to look sharp, and get to home-shelter, for there are dark clouds coming up!"

At the last words, he gave a glance from the sky to Frederick Linfoot; and then, touching his cap for the handsome gratuity he had received, he went on whistling his interrupted air.

When they had ascended the steps, and got into the streets, Jessie proposed that Frederick should leave her; for her father often came up into the town on a Sunday, and it would not be well to encounter him.

Frederick smiled to himself. Here was a mighty step gained—Jessie herself proposing

concealment. He pretended to agree with her; but, keeping a watchful look-out for Jefferson, he contrived to accompany her to the corner of the street where she lived, and then, with many grateful pressures of the hand, he took a tender adieu.

CHAPTER XV.

SISTERLY LOVE.

As Jessie entered the house-door, opened for her by her sister, she perceived that their visitor was young Geoffry Meynell. He rose from his seat by the fire to shake hands with her, and her father took his pipe from his mouth to bestow on her a paternal kiss. There was a look of genial satisfaction and comfort diffused over the whole party. Geoffry, to be sure, looked somewhat grave in his full suit of mourning, but his eye was light and clear; for their talk had been on a joyous subject—none other than the marriage, in spring, of Nellie and the gamekeeper. It appeared as if Jessie's arrival had disturbed them, for Geoffry almost immediately said that he must

be moving, if he meant to be at home before nightfall.

"Nonsense, man! sit still! there's good two hours' daylight yet: you must have a cup of tea: be quick, lasses!" remonstrated Jefferson, extending his arm to bar the passage to the door.

Geoffry, nothing loath, reseated himself, as Nellie entered with a pile of buttered toast and some hot muffins. There was a fragrant odour issuing from the kitchen of broiled ham, which presently made its appearance, temptingly overlaid with poached eggs. Jefferson smiled his satisfaction at his useful daughter, and nodded approvingly at Geoffry, as the whole party drew round the table to tea. Jessie was the last to be seated, and there was a slight assumption of dignity in her manner, which called forth a rather sharp remark from her father.

"Lord, bairn! who would take thee for a poor man's daughter, with your ringlets, and laces, and fal-lals!" he said, glancing at her gay attire.

Jessie tossed her head, but said nothing;

and Geoffry looking at her, pronounced in his own mind that she was fit for nought but to be put in a glass-case for folks to stare at.

This opinion he was cautious, however, not to confide to Nellie, for she was very jealous of all that related to her sister, and would have considered such a verdict very insulting; though the poor, vain, little milliner might, and probably would, have regarded it as a pretty compliment.

During the progress of the meal the conversation was not brisk; and, after Frank had induced Geoffry to partake of his hospitality, he did not urge him to prolong his stay, for he had a "goodish ride" before him.

Jefferson contrived to have something to look after in the back-kitchen, and he called Jessie to help him—probably to give the declared lovers an opportunity of a little talk before they separated.

Geoffry immediately availed himself of the absence of unconcerned parties to wind his strong arm round Nellie's waist, and, drawing her to his side, to imprint half a dozen kisses

on her rosy lips—a pardonable liberty Nellie thought, for she made no resistance.

"There, that seals our compact, Nellie darling!" said the daring gamekeeper; "so, now, I have leave to come and see you whenever I can—and I'll make opportunity enough. You may look for me every Sunday afternoon. You and father must come over to Houghton, and see our place again: you'll like a country life, Nellie?"

"Oh yes! yes, Geoffry! far better than this great, black town!" replied the girl, fervently.

Geoffry was constrained to kiss those pretty lips again: indeed, I can't say how long they might have stood there, utterly forgetful of everybody and everything but themselves and each other, had not Jefferson, with a loud cough and a stumble on the low steps, come groping into the room in search of his hat; thinking, no doubt, that the adieu had lasted long enough.

Geoffry gave Nellie one last embrace, and then snatched up his riding-whip and hat to be gone.

"Stop a bit! I'll go down to the Red Lion with you, Meynell, and leave the lasses to have a gossip by themselves: trust 'em to find plenty to talk about!" said the father, bustling about for his stick.

Geoffry took advantage of the moment he had to wait to exchange a few more parting words with Nellie, and, at Jefferson's summons of "Come along, man!" he snatched another kiss and strode away.

Jessie entered the room, as the street-door closed on her father and Geoffry, with a rather vexed expression of countenance; but she went up to Nellie and wished her joy. It only wanted that to change Nellie's mood altogether: she burst into tears, and sat down in her father's arm-chair to have her cry out.

Jessie never could resist her sister's sorrow, and, with her arm round her neck, she poured every word of sisterly love and comfort into her ear that came into her mind.

Being but an April shower of intermingled happiness and regret, of sun and clouds, it was soon over; and, looking up with a struggling smile on her face, she said she wondered what

she could be crying for, when everything was coming about as she had always hoped it might. Jessie wondered too: she did not think it could be a melancholy matter to be going to marry the man of one's choice; and she said so, with an *arrière pensée* at Frederick Linfoot and herself.

"No, of course, that is not the sad part of it: it is leaving father just when he is beginning to grow old, and wants somebody to take care for him—and leaving you, Jessie!" said the elder sister, in an accent of indescribable tenderness.

"Oh, Nellie! don't take on about father or me!" replied the milliner, briskly; "father is quite a young man yet, and surely I'm old enough to take care of myself: besides, perhaps, I may be married first, who knows?"

"Who knows?" echoed Nellie, gently; but the sadness in her thoughts was wearing off as they returned to Geoffry and their future home in the glen at Houghton. "We never were at Houghton, though we lived so near, Jessie. Geoffry says it is a fine place, and Miss Talbot, though a high lady, is good to

her servants. He told me what a pretty place his lodge is in summer: lonesome in winter; but always pleasant in summer, and spring, and autumn. How I shall love to get among the trees and woods again! Have a cow, perhaps, and fowls! Oh, Jessie! won't you be glad to come and stay with us after we are married?"

"Yes, that I shall!" replied Jessie, gaily. "I don't know but a country life is better than a town life—if you must work," she added, after a pause.

"And what probability is there for anything but work for such as we are? For my part I like work," said Nellie.

The younger sister leant back in her chair, and tapped her foot musingly on the floor, as if she were debating some knotty point in her mind which was very difficult of solution. Nellie went on.

"I shall take such pride in having everything so nice for Geoffry: his mother was such a good house-wife, he says, it would not do to disappoint him. Oh, Jessie! you can't tell how happily I feel at the thought of being married

to him! It is all so strange and uncertain to look forward to, isn't it? But Christmas over, it will soon be here. Only I do wish this dreadful trial didn't stand in the way. Do you know Jessie, Geoffry would not have talked about being married so soon if he hadn't lost his poor father; but he told me he and his father had often talked about me, and that I was the girl he always wanted Geoffry to marry; and he's quite sure it's the thing of all others would please the old man if he could see what is to be. Folks may think him in a hurry, and unfeeling, he says; but he knows better than anybody else what his father would have him do. And besides, as he says, it is so lonesome and comfortless having nobody to to go home to, but that funny old nurse Goodhugh. You recollect Goodhugh, Jessie?"

"Oh yes, perfectly," responded the young milliner, coming out of her reverie.

"She has been keeping house for a long while for the Meynells," said Nellie; "she is a very decent body, and will stay with him till we are married."

"And when is it to be? have you fixed?"

asked Jessie, briskly, beginning to enter more into the spirit of the thing, and considering it after all a very respectable match for Nellie —quite as good a one as they had any right to expect.

"Geoffry said in the spring," replied the happy elder sister.

"Well, and so I suppose you will have lots to do before hand. I'll make you a bonnet of white crape, like one Bella Grimstone's got," said Jessie.

"No, no, nonsense," laughingly remonstrated Nellie, shaking her head; "nothing so gay will do for me. I must have a plain Dunstable, with a white ribbon. A fine wife, indeed, Miss Talbots would think their gamekeeper had brought home if she made her appearance at church in a white crape bonnet and artificials. Besides, Geoffry wouldn't like it: indeed I heard him say, not long since, that he could not abide finery."

"Pshaw!" ejaculated Jessie, impatiently, "as if he were likely to know what was pretty in bonnets and gowns. I doubt whether he knows a shawl from a mantle."

"But for all that he may know what is suitable for his wife to wear," rejoined Nellie, with more decision than she ever displayed before on such a matter.

"To be sure; he is not likely to have the same taste as Frederick Linfoot," returned Jessie.

"No! Mr Linfoot is a fine gentleman. Do you know, Jessie, father talks of leaving the factory altogether, soon: I wish he would stay on; but he has got some project in his head about emigration, and he thinks there is nothing more to be done in this worn-out old land, as he calls it. These club-meetings quite upset his mind. He has been so late every night this week, and wages are lower because trade is low. He said he had had some talk with Mr Wilson; and I fancy from what he said that they came to high words. It is a pity, for Mr Wilson has behaved very well to father ever since he went to the Hardwicke. Have you seen Mr Linfoot, to hear anything about it?"

"I saw Mr Linfoot yesterday; he came to the shop for some gloves, but he never men-

tioned any thing of the kind," replied Jessie; suppressing the fact of the row down the river in his company that very afternoon.

If Nellie had known, she might have communicated to her sister that their father had received his wages and his dismissal together on the previous Saturday night; but she did not, so the little milliner was saved the additional trouble, if trouble it were, of hearing that her father was no longer one of her lover's workmen.

"Perhaps it is nothing serious, for he never said a word about it to Geoffry Meynell: we talked a bit last night, when he came in rather earlier than usual," said Nellie.

"I don't think Mr Linfoot would do anything hard about father," suggested Jessie.

"Oh, no! only father got into an argument with Mr Wilson about his books—them books there on the shelf; and he talked about the rights of the workman, till Mr Wilson got angry, and told him he thought him impertinent to speak so to his employer. And father answered back sharpish, you may be sure; and so they got on, till Mr Wilson said, 'Nobody

set up for a reformer but them that needed reformation at home most;' and he called the books father likes so, 'humbug, lies, trash,' and I don't know what besides. So father flung home in a great passion, and read that 'Past and Present' till midnight, after he had told me of his vexation."

"Oh! maybe it will be all forgot by Monday," said Jessie, quietly; "you know father and Mr Wilson have had many a tiff before this."

Nellie assented; and for a short while the sisters sat silently, one on either side of the fire, musing on their difficulties, and not a little perhaps on their hopes.

By-and-bye Nellie began to "side up" the kitchen in readiness for the night, for the relics of tea were still unremoved. Jessie offered to help her; but the elder sister said laughingly, she could do best alone.

Nellie was in the little kitchen behind, when there came a low tap, as of a knuckle, against the glass of the window looking on the street. Jessie started, and getting up, peeped out at a corner of the blind. She could see

a man's figure looming large and dark on the pavement; and the tap being cautiously repeated, and the attitude being not unlike that of Frederick Linfoot, she crept to the street-door, and gently opened it. Nellie, however, was not so busy but that she heard her, and she came forward to see what it was. Jessie's suspicion was correct: it was Frederick Linfoot; and as he came hastily within the passage, she saw he was agitated and pale.

"What is the matter?" demanded the two girls, simultaneously, turning faint.

"Shut the door: the people are coming from chapel; there is no use letting everybody hear. Where is your father?" asked the manufacturer.

Jessie trembled, and leant against the dresser, for they had all entered the front kitchen.

"I do not know, Mr Linfoot. He went out about an hour and a half since with a friend," replied Nellie, who always took the lead in an emergency.

"Did he say when he should be at home?"

again asked Mr Linfoot. An answer in the negative was given.

"Nobody must know, girls, that I have been here," said Frederick—"not a soul, mind that. I came to give your father warning to get out of the way: he has not much time. There will be a warrant out against him to-morrow, and Mr Wilson does not fall asleep over his business, I can tell you. If he comes in to-night, bid him be off. No one could have warned him but me, so mind how you act—mind, Jessie. I would not be seen in this matter for a thousand pounds."

"Oh, sir! what is it?—what have you against father?" asked Nellie, clasping her hands in a fever of anxiety.

"Felony, forgery, half a dozen charges, I dare say: but I cannot stop to tell more: remember what I have said, and tell your father this country won't be safe for him any longer. I'm sorry, Jessie! I'm bitterly sorry!" he exclaimed, with a touch of feeling, as he saw the pretty eyes of the girl overflowing with tears. "I can't even stay to kiss them away. Good night;" and pulling a fur cap

down over his forehead, and turning up the collar of his coat, he left the house hastily; the sisters seeing, as he went, that he had not ventured to pay them this hazardous visit without assuming some sort of disguise.

For some minutes after this news had fallen upon them, neither of the girls moved: Nellie recovered herself first; as for Jessie, she was bitterly weeping, and her appearance would instantly have betrayed to any comer that she was loaded with some terrible knowledge.

Nellie did not try to comfort her; she just let her cry on, and finished putting away the things she had left unfinished, when interrupted by the manufacturer's unexpected visit. When all was done, she came and sat down by the fire, stooping over it with her hands clasped round her knees, as if she were trying to warm the chilled heart in her bosom. Her feelings were too deep as yet for any words to relieve them. Her love for her father, her pride in him, had been very great; her esteem, her pride were annihilated at a blow: but not her love! no, not her love! That her father was a thief, liable to be sent to prison, tried, trans-

ported! oh! the bitter shame, the agony of such a destiny! Nellie groaned aloud.

"Oh, Nellie! Nellie! what shall we do?" said her sister impetuously, throwing her arms about her neck; "what shall we do? And so happy as we were an hour ago!"

Nellie's only answer was a bitter sigh, and a gentle putting away of those loving arms.

"Speak, Nellie! Oh! do say something!" pleaded Jessie, wildly.

Nellie looked up with a hot, tearless eye, and begged Jessie to sit down.

"I want to think what will be best," she said, in extenuation of her incapability of responding to her sister's violent grief.

So Jessie sat down; and, with her eyes on the fire, listened to the coming of the expected step. At last Nellie got up, and, followed by her sister, mounted the narrow stair-case. They went into their father's room; and there Nellie began to put together in a bundle some few necessaries for her father; and, collecting all the money they had in the house, she put it in a little purse of her own.

These preparations made, they sat down at the foot of the bed with their arms round

each other to listen. One hour, two hours went over, but still he did not come. During that terrible watching and waiting, both silently past in review the probable results of the crime of their unhappy father.

Nellie's face lost all its rosy mirth in that short vigil, and in its place came a look of hard, troubled determination which never afterwards left it. St Grim's clock sounded terribly loud in the stillness of the Sabbath night; and, just as it was on the last stroke of eleven, the raising of the latch echoed through the house, and their father's voice called loudly and cheerily from the bottom of the stairs,—" What, girls! both a-bed!"

Nellie rose, took the bundle and purse in her hand, and turned to the door. Jessie remained still with her head sunk on her breast, and her tears streaming down her pallid cheeks. Nellie touched her on the shoulder. She looked up.

" Come, Jessie, we may never see him again!" said the elder sister.

Jessie burst into a violent passion of tears, and threw herself upon the bed. Nellie went down. Her father stood with his back to the

fire, and he looked surprised when his daughter came in. She stood before him, looking in his face for a few seconds without speaking.

"Well, Nellie, you look all mazed; what have you gotten there?" he asked carelessly.

"Father, there has been one here to-night —Mr Frederick Linfoot."

Jefferson started, and advanced nearer to her, seizing her arm. "He said we were to tell you to go—go abroad, father. Oh, father, I will come to you—I will indeed!"

These last words were uttered passionately, as Nellie saw in his face the confirmation of all they had heard. He kissed her twice, called her his "good honest girl, his good daughter;" and then detached her hastily from his neck, where she clung with an agony of sorrow, such as few would have supposed her capable.

"Never think of me again, my lass: I have been a bad father to you. Where is Jessie? Let me see her before I go."

Jessie rushed into the room as he spoke, and sprung to his side, hanging on his arm, and crying bitterly: he kissed her gently,

bade her mind Nellie, seized the bundle, threw the purse back on the table, and left the house.

"Father! father! I will come to you soon!" were the last words he heard as he crossed the threshold.

The two sisters returned hand-in-hand into the kitchen, Jessie's loud sorrow becoming still more vehement. Nellie was at last obliged to forget herself, and try to soothe her: to comfort would have been a vain effort. There could be no comfort for either of them yet; and, for Nellie, no consolation or forgetfulness of the disgrace that had fallen upon them.

"Whisht! Jessie! whisht!" were the elder sister's first words. "You will bring the neighbours about us to hear what's amiss. Do whisht! Jessie do!"

"What does it matter? they will hear to-morrow," sobbed Jessie, passionately.

"Why, there is no need that people should know father has gone off to-night: it would not mend his chance of getting away out of the country," remonstrated Nellie.

Thus reasoned with, the little milliner suppressed her violent sobs; and, after struggling for a few minutes with her emotion, she sat, comparatively calm, before the dull fire, now sunk down to the third bar in the grate.

Nellie had not yet shed a tear. Her heart seemed girdled with a chain of burning steel, her brain throbbed, her blood coursed feverishly through her veins. Jessie's next words moved her fiercely.

"O! sister!—And Geoffry!—What will Geoffry say?" she said suddenly.

Nellie bent down closer over the fire, with her hand pressed against her aching heart.

"Why, Jessie, what can he say?" asked she, sadly; "he can only leave me. Of course, I don't expect him to marry me now: I could not expect any respectable man to seek me for his wife."

This made Jessie's tears burst out afresh. Was not what was applicable for her sister applicable also to herself?

Nellie took no notice for some minutes of this fresh outbreak; but at last, as if nerving herself to a task, she sat up in her chair, and

bade Jessie listen to her. Jessie smothered her grief, and did as she was bade.

"We must leave this house at once: *we* can't pay the rent," began Nellie, resolutely. "I will contrive to let you know, some day during the week, where I fix to live. I can keep myself, and have a roof over our heads, if, as I'm afraid, Miss Crookes discharges you."

Jessie sobbed spasmodically; but Nellie went on.

"You can do dressmaking: we must try to earn enough to carry us over the winter, and save what we can, to emigrate. Where our father goes, I mean to follow: won't you too, Jessie?"

"Oh, Nellie! don't let us talk about it! How can I leave Frederick?" gasped Jessie.

"Why, my poor misguided bairn! what would you stay by him for? Do you flatter your heart that he will really marry you, after all that's come and gone?" asked Nellie.

"Yes! I really and truly do! Oh, Nellie!

if you but knew how he loves me!" returned the younger sister, firmly, finding some comfort in her strong faith in her lover.

Nellie sighed deeply, and stirred up the dying embers into a blaze.

"Well, God forgive me if I judge him hardly! but I could find in my heart to say that I wish you had never seen him!" she said.

"You do judge him very hardly, Nellie!" returned Jessie, with a degree of irritation in the tone of her voice which smote Nellie's conscience. "Why, if he had cared nothing about me, would he have come, as he did to-night, to warn father—who has cheated him, as well as Mr Wilson—to get out of the way? Would he have done it, when, perhaps, if it gets out, it may injure him with his partner, if he hadn't loved some of us? I am sure I would not! and I don't believe Frederick Linfoot would either!"

Jessie's energetic defence of her lover, in raising her own confidence in him, was proving an effective solace for the grief she had felt a short while before. Poor Nellie said no

more : she thought it would be cruel to try t destroy what gave such support under a heav affliction. As for her own love, it had no become trouble and grief to her. She fel how much braver a heart she could hav brought to bear against their shame, if n other, dear to her inexpressibly, had bee bound to her fate. Of Geoffry's feelings sh could not bear to think: perhaps he migh despise her; perhaps he might never com near her in her sorrow, but only feel thank-ful that their marriage had not taken place and so involved him in the embarrassments Then this bitter thought was rejected as un-worthy of him. She knew he had a good honest heart: he would not forsake her a once, but he would talk no more to her o love : he would not take the felon's daughte for the wife of his bosom. Nellie though that, in the portioning out of the huma lottery, she had drawn a blank. Jessie's voic brought her back to the present and all its dif-ficulties.

"The fire is nearly out: let us go to bed," she said, in a wearied, querulous voice.

again asked Mr Linfoot. An answer in the negative was given.

"Nobody must know, girls, that I have been here," said Frederick—"not a soul, mind that. I came to give your father warning to get out of the way: he has not much time. There will be a warrant out against him to-morrow, and Mr Wilson does not fall asleep over his business, I can tell you. If he comes in to-night, bid him be off. No one could have warned him but me, so mind how you act—mind, Jessie. I would not be seen in this matter for a thousand pounds."

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how troubled were the dreams into which she had fallen. Jessie's appearance touched Nellie keenly; and as she softly pressed her lips on the burning forehead, her heart reproached her for the thought of leaving her sister, even for their unfortunate father.

"Poor little lassie! she will need all my love yet," said Nellie to herself, thinking over Jessie's absorption in her attachment to Frederick Linfoot.

And Nellie's foresight was not wrong therein. There are few amongst us, even the most fortunate, who can afford to make light of the ties of blood; rudely broken, often beyond knitting together again, but never replaced, and never forgotten.

Nellie's slumbers were disturbed and without rest; and she was terrified by the fevered suggestions of her over-excited brain:—her father pursued and overtaken, herself and Jessie driven hither and thither by persecuting beings, and every body conspiring to oppress them. She awoke with the dawn quite unrefreshed, and rose immediately: that day had many bitter duties in its plan. Jessie

still slept, and more tranquilly; so Nellie stole quietly out of the room, and left her to her brief respite from trouble.

The fire was soon lighted in the kitchen, and the breakfast-table spread. Then Nellie took down from their shelves their father's books, carefully packing them up in a large clothes basket, with the big Bible on the top: they must go with her, wherever her new home might be. The house in which they lived was rented by the week, as were all the small tenements built with a view to furnishing habitations for the work-people at the Hardwicke factory; so that there was no difficulty in releasing themselves from the burden of a rent which the resources of the two girls could not possibly meet.

But in making preparations for finally quitting it, Nellie determined to continue there for a few days longer, in case her poor father should lose hope of effecting his escape, and return home to wait the arrest with which he was threatened. Whilst her painful task was going forward, she heard her sister moving overhead; and presently Jessie came down

stairs, her Sunday finery forming a pitiable contrast with her pale cheeks and dejected air.

There was now no time to linger: Miss Crookes required her shopwomen to be at her house by half-past eight, and it barely wanted half an hour to that time. Breakfast was a mere pretence with both the girls; and after a few minutes, Jessie sprang up, and, looking at the clock, said she was late.

"Good-bye, darling, good-bye! Jessie, we will never leave each other: good-bye! I will come to-night and tell you where you will find me next Sunday," said Nellie, kissing her sister. She watched the gay young figure down the street, shading her eyes with her hand, till she was out of sight, and then turned back into the house.

"The worst of it is," said she, bitterly to herself, as she shut the door and found herself alone—"the worst of it is, we cannot sit down in our trouble; it is always work, work: aching head, aching heart, it is all the same; we must go on working, or starve.

CHAPTER XVI.

SORROWS NEVER COME SINGLE.

SOMETIMES half a dozen neighbours would pop in during the day to exchange gossip with Nellie Jefferson; but as luck would have it, on this particular Monday not a creature came near the house. The poor girl, in the bitterness of her heart, imagined that they had scented afar off the taint that had come upon their name.

The morning was very long, for it was hard to sit down to sew with such a sorrowful spirit; but it had become more necessary now than ever. As she worked she turned over in her mind the houses she knew where she would be likely to find a decent shelter, such as her means would afford. She would have

liked to go back to the huckster's shop, where they had lodged when they first came to Salford; but Mary Dales, though a kindly, well-meaning woman in her way, was a notorious gossip, and Nellie could not bear the idea of being questioned and cross-questioned on her change of circumstances; so at last she resolved to go where she should not be known—no difficult matter in a large town. After tea, she set out on her expedition, which was speedily successful; and then she walked over the bridge to communicate it to her sister.

The appearance of the somewhat homely-attired Nellie created a slight sensation among the fashionable young people, especially when they became aware she was Jessie Jefferson's sister; and the new shopwoman immediately sunk several degrees in the estimation of her companions for having so unpretending a relative.

As Nellie talked in a somewhat earnest whisper to Jessie, a gentleman entered the shop. Nellie turned and saw Frederick Linfoot. He addressed himself to Bella Grimstone, seeing how the two were occupied,

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liked to go back to the huckster's shop, where they had lodged when they first came to Salford; but Mary Dales, though a kindly, well-meaning woman in her way, was a notorious gossip, and Nellie could not bear the idea of being questioned and cross-questioned on her change of circumstances; so atlast she resolved to go where she should not be known—no difficult matter in a large town. After tea, she set out on her expedition, which was speedily successful; and then she walked over the bridge to communicate it to her sister.

The appearance of the somewhat homely-attired Nellie created a slight sensation among the fashionable young people, especially when they became aware she was Jessie Jefferson's sister; and the new shopwoman immediately sunk several degrees in the estimation of her companions for having so unpretending a relative.

As Nellie talked in a somewhat earnest whisper to Jessie, a gentleman entered the shop. Nellie turned and saw Frederick Linfoot. He addressed himself to Bella Grimstone, seeing how the two were occupied,

and while she was waiting upon him, he wrote something on the leaf of his pocket-book, tore it out, and quietly passed it to Jessie. He had written only a few words, as follows:—

"My Darling,—Believe me, I would have helped it if I could; but your father was taken this afternoon, and brought in custody to the station-house. He will be examined to-morrow before the magistrates. I will do my best to prevent his being committed; but, if I fail, forgive me. Mr Wilson is outrageous against him."

Jessie's face blanched as she read these few lines, and passed them to her sister. Nellie had not ventured to hope for any other termination to the sad affair; and though she, perhaps, felt the shame more keenly than Jessie, she exhibited it less. After exchanging a few more words with each other, the elder sister took her departure, and Mr Linfoot contrived to transfer his wants from Miss Grimstone to Jessie—a slight which was particularly mortifying to the recipient.

"There is something up more than common with that chitty-faced little Jefferson!" she

said, spitefully, to Jane Writhe, who was occupied watching the proceedings at the other side of the shop. Jane nodded her assent. "Didn't you see him give Jessie a leaf out of his pocket-book, and she passed it to her sister?" continued Bella.

"Hush!" said Jane, nudging her; "hush! you speak so loud they will be hearing you! Well, I declare, if Jessie is not crying! I wonder what it can be?"

Jane Writhe was left to wonder; for, after a few minutes Mr Linfoot quitted the shop, and Jessie rushed away to her own room, locked the door, and indulged in a violent fit of crying.

It would be too much to say that this visit of her lover, bearer of evil-tidings though he was, had not brought her consolation. Her father's disgrace had not changed Frederick's tenderness to her: if possible, his smile had been more winning, and his eyes more gently expressive.

Jessie was prepared to declare that all is not lost so long as love continue. Far different was it with the elder sister, as with her head bent down she walked rapidly back over

the bridge to her home. When she turned the latch-key in the door, and pushed it open, its chilling emptiness struck her like a new trouble: the fire had gone out in the grate, and nothing remained but a few white ashes, cold and comfortless. Nellie had not the heart to re-light it: there was no need to look for anybody coming home now.

"Never mind! I must leave it for good, to-morrow!" she said to herself, as she took off her bonnet and shawl.

The remainder of the evening was passed in putting together her own little treasures: her work-box, and her father's chair; the bird-cage, with its noisy occupant; the old clock they had brought with them from Staunton: these must go to the room which she had taken for herself, and for her sister, in case Miss Crookes declined keeping her; which was only too probable. No necessity but sickness should oblige her to part with them.

These preparations completed, Nellie closed the window-curtains, for it was becoming dark, and sat down with her elbows on the table and her head in her hands; but the

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with such a sadness that, for the first time since the knowledge of her father's troubles had been brought her, the big tears rolled down her cheeks, and her breast heaved with sobs. By-and-bye she wiped her eyes, looked more intently at the "Dear, dear Geoffry," and wrote on. The tears had unsealed her thoughts, and, as they came, the pen recorded them:—

"Dear, dear Geoffry,

"Father is in prison: I don't know much why—Mr Linfoot says he has robbed Mr Wilson. He is to be tried at the Assizes. Oh, Geoffry! who could have thought it would ever come to this? Poor Jessie and me are nearly heart-broken for poor father! And, Geoffry dear, you must not think ill of me. We must not be married, as we talked of; but oh! I will always love you! Do not be hard on father; he has plenty to go through, and so have we all in this world. Geoffry, I begin to think this is a very hard world for the poor. Oh, how I wish we had never left Staunton! I am going to

leave this house to-morrow, and I am going to live at Mrs Renton's, near the church. She is very poor, but a decent woman—a widow.

"You will maybe hear people say hard things about father: we do not know how much he was tempted; perhaps he is not as bad as people say. He was a kind of clerk and overseer over the workmen, and a deal of money went through his hands—men's wages, and the like. I did not think it of father. I always thought him proud—more like to starve than to take aught that was not his.

"And Geoffry, if he should be sent out of the country, I shall follow him, if Jessie is settled, which she expects soon to be. Don't try to change my mind. It is right that I should go with poor father; and I could not bear that anybody should think scorn of you for marrying a dishonest man's daughter. Don't think I shall ever give up caring for you; but do not come near me yet.

"Oh, Geoffry! I know how sorry you will be when you read this letter: I am sad to have it to write. I feel as if there were no-

thing on earth worth living for. But for poor Jessie, and father, and you, I should wish I were in the churchyard!

"God bless you, Geoffry.

"Your loving

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With very many tears was this weary letter bedewed, and then carefully wafered up, and, directed in the writer's boldest hand, tremulous at best; it was laid upon the mantel-shelf until the morrow, when it was to be posted.

About the same hour that Nellie was following the few articles of furniture she had reserved from the contents of the other house to her new home, there was a scene going on at Miss Crookes' establishment, peculiarly diverting to Bella Grimstone and Miss Jane Writhe. The whole staff of workwomen and shopwomen was collected in the small room behind the shop, and in the midst, arraigned like a culprit, stood Jessie Jefferson, her face struggling between grief and indignation.

Miss Crookes was enthroned in a comfortable chair, and regarded her, till then, favoured dependant with an overwhelming air of dignity and scorn.

"So you, Jessie Jefferson, have had the impertinence to intrude yourself into an 'ouse like this!" said the angry milliner, pointing her finger contemptuously at the shrinking girl. "You, the daughter of a professional thief!"

Jessie made an attempt to speak, but Miss Crookes would not hear her.

"Silence, girl! do not profane our h'ears! I have only to request that you will leave my 'ouse at once, and never darken my doors again. Go, girl!"

The discarded workwoman turned to depart, and had got close to the door, when the imperious voice of Miss Crookes commanded her to stop.

Jessie turned round, the tears in her eyes rapidly washing the angry flush from her burning cheeks.

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governess whispered behind her—"Bear up: never mind!"

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Jessie's tears seemed to have a softening influence even on the heart of the milliner; for, after a pause and a clearing of the throat, she went on:—

"It may seem h'unjust to you that I should discharge you for no fault of yours, but I must keep up the character of my h'establishment. When we are particularly busy, I will let you have work to do, at a reasonable charge—at 'ome. Of course you will work as a dressmaker and milliner?"

Jessie murmured an assent.

" And I'm sure I wish I may see you married. There, the box is done!" responded Miss Forster.

As she was speaking, the door opened again, and Miss Crookes came in, with a large parcel in her hands, and a mollified aspect.

"Miss Jefferson, I will let you have this tulle dress to embroider, if you will get it done by the middle of next week. It will give you time to settle your plans, and look about for better work," said the milliner.

Jessie's face flushed.

" Thank you, ma'am; you are very good," she said. " I will get it done by the time."

"Mind you do! It is for the younger Miss Talbot of 'Oughton, for a grand ball: she must not be disappointed. And don't bring it 'ome till dusk, after the shops are closed. Good morning. Go out by the private door; there are ladies in the show-room."

And, with these words, the stately Miss Crookes marched out of the room; and in a few minutes the " private door " was closed after poor Jessie by the sympathising Miss Forster.

Forster packed, she dressed herself in her prettiest mantle and her white tulle bonnet, putting both on with the utmost care. "They will get less crushed on me, than in the box," she said, in explanation of the look of astonishment directed towards her by her companion.

Miss Forster smiled archly. "Do you hope to meet somebody on your way?" she asked.

"I hope, but I scarcely expect it, for Mr Linfoot cannot know that I am leaving this morning," replied Jessie; "so if he should come in this noon, will you tell him?"

"Yes. But, Jessie, that was not bad advice Miss Crookes gave you about him," said Miss Forster, hesitatingly; "though, to be sure, there is no use paying attention to such an old croaker. She always suspects everybody: old witch!"

"I care nothing for her suspicions. I'm as sure of Frederick Linfoot's love, and *surer*, than of anything else in the world!" exclaimed Jessie, warmly.

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Then go now, while you have your things on," replied Nellie, sadly, not deceived by her sister's plausible reason. Poor girl! she wanted another chance of a meeting with her lover; and Nellie, mistaken as she could not but think her, did not like to deprive her of the gratification.

"Will you take this parcel on home then, carefully; it is white tulle to embroider, which Miss Crookes gave me to do: she is not quite so bad as she seems," said Jessie.

"Few folks are," replied Nellie, with a sigh, thinking of her father.

"You need not come back here, Jessie, for I've almost done. I shall leave the key with Mrs Frankish, to give to Mr Wylie's clerk, when he calls for the rents on Friday. You'll find me down at Court Lane—make haste back."

And then the drooping butterfly girl went back down the shady side of the street towards the bridge, and the saddened work-a-day sister, with her heavy basket on one arm and her

Jessie met nobody she knew in her walk through the town, though she loitered by the way; and, with spirits considerably damped, and tears ready to flow, she saw Nellie returning, for the last time, to the house in Talbot Street.

There was no need to give her sister an explanation of what had occurred: it was legible enough on her face. She turned, and they went back together to fetch the few remaining things and Geoffry's letter.

"So you have written to Geoffry Meynell," observed Jessie, looking at the address of the letter reared up on the mantle-shelf.

She did not ask what was the subject of the communication: probably her conjecture was very near the truth.

"Yes—take it down: we will put it in the post as we go past the grocer's shop. The letter-box is there, Jessie—isn't it? There will be no need to go over the bridge," said her sister.

"I'll carry it for you. Those Yates' people are so inquisitive: if they see us put a letter in, they will wonder who it's for! I never

leave this house to-morrow, and I am going to live at Mrs Renton's, near the church. She is very poor, but a decent woman—a widow.

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"Oh, Geoffry! I know how sorry you will be when you read this letter: I am sad to have it to write. I feel as if there were no-

bird-cage in her other hand, took her final farewell of their once pleasant home, and plodded away to the scene of her new toils, and temptations, and troubles.

It was a very bright morning towards the end of October. There was a glowing sun that gave a reminder of summer days; the crisp brown leaves from the trees in Old Court Yard had fallen, many of them, over the wall, and lay in a bed on the pavement. Nellie's feet lingered amongst them; she liked their rustling sound and earthy smell. I know not what thoughts of the country life she *might* have led, came across her as she crushed them under her lagging tread; but her heart bounded wildly in her breast, and she uttered a stifled cry. Then hurrying on, as if she dared no longer dwell on such a theme, she came opposite St Grim's church porch. The door stood open, and, scarcely knowing why, Nellie went in and walked half way down one of the side aisles. There was a wedding going on. She had no interest in the parties met together to pledge their faith to each other before God's altar, for better for worse, till death should them

stairs, her Sunday finery forming a pitiable contrast with her pale cheeks and dejected air.

There was now no time to linger: Miss Crookes required her shopwomen to be at her house by half-past eight, and it barely wanted half an hour to that time. Breakfast was a mere pretence with both the girls; and after a few minutes, Jessie sprang up, and, looking at the clock, said she was late.

"Good-bye, darling, good-bye! Jessie, we will never leave each other: good-bye! I will come to-night and tell you where you will find me next Sunday," said Nellie, kissing her sister. She watched the gay young figure down the street, shading her eyes with her hand, till she was out of sight, and then turned back into the house.

"The worst of it is," said she, bitterly to herself, as she shut the door and found herself alone—"the worst of it is, we cannot sit down in our trouble; it is always work, work: aching head, aching heart, it is all the same; we must go on working, or starve.

CHAPTER XVI.

SORROWS NEVER COME SINGLE.

SOMETIMES half a dozen neighbours would pop in during the day to exchange gossip with Nellie Jefferson; but as luck would have it, on this particular Monday not a creature came near the house. The poor girl, in the bitterness of her heart, imagined that they had scented afar off the taint that had come upon their name.

The morning was very long, for it was hard to sit down to sew with such a sorrowful spirit; but it had become more necessary now than ever. As she worked she turned over in her mind the houses she knew where she would be likely to find a decent shelter, such as her means would afford. She would have

liked to go back to the huckster's shop, where they had lodged when they first came to Salford; but Mary Dales, though a kindly, well-meaning woman in her way, was a notorious gossip, and Nellie could not bear the idea of being questioned and cross-questioned on her change of circumstances; so at last she resolved to go where she should not be known—no difficult matter in a large town. After tea, she set out on her expedition, which was speedily successful; and then she walked over the bridge to communicate it to her sister.

The appearance of the somewhat homely-attired Nellie created a slight sensation among the fashionable young people, especially when they became aware she was Jessie Jefferson's sister; and the new shopwoman immediately sunk several degrees in the estimation of her companions for having so unpretending a relative.

As Nellie talked in a somewhat earnest whisper to Jessie, a gentleman entered the shop. Nellie turned and saw Frederick Linfoot. He addressed himself to Bella Grimstone, seeing how the two were occupied,

and while she was waiting upon him, he wrote something on the leaf of his pocket-book, tore it out, and quietly passed it to Jessie. He had written only a few words, as follows:—

"MY DARLING,—Believe me, I would have helped it if I could; but your father was taken this afternoon, and brought in custody to the station-house. He will be examined to-morrow before the magistrates. I will do my best to prevent his being committed; but, if I fail, forgive me. Mr Wilson is outrageous against him."

Jessie's face blanched as she read these few lines, and passed them to her sister. Nellie had not ventured to hope for any other termination to the sad affair; and though she, perhaps, felt the shame more keenly than Jessie, she exhibited it less. After exchanging a few more words with each other, the elder sister took her departure, and Mr Linfoot contrived to transfer his wants from Miss Grimstone to Jessie—a slight which was particularly mortifying to the recipient.

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said, spitefully, to Jane Writhe, who was occupied watching the proceedings at the other side of the shop. Jane nodded her assent. "Didn't you see him give Jessie a leaf out of his pocket-book, and she passed it to her sister?" continued Bella.

"Hush!" said Jane, nudging her; "hush! you speak so loud they will be hearing you! Well, I declare, if Jessie is not crying! I wonder what it can be?"

Jane Writhe was left to wonder; for, after a few minutes Mr Linfoot quitted the shop, and Jessie rushed away to her own room, locked the door, and indulged in a violent fit of crying.

It would be too much to say that this visit of her lover, bearer of evil-tidings though he was, had not brought her consolation. Her father's disgrace had not changed Frederick's tenderness to her: if possible, his smile had been more winning, and his eyes more gently expressive.

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The remainder of the evening was passed in putting together her own little treasures: her work-box, and her father's chair; the bird-cage, with its noisy occupant; the old clock they had brought with them from Staunton: these must go to the room which she had taken for herself, and for her sister, in case Miss Crookes declined keeping her; which was only too probable. No necessity but sickness should oblige her to part with them.

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Jessie murmured an assent.

"If you are steady and industrious, you may get on. Your sister appears a staid, respectable person."

As Miss Crookes spoke, she rose to intimate that the audience was at an end; and Jessie Jefferson went out, and ran up stairs, smothering her grief, to prepare for her departure. A tap at the door came almost immediately, and, without waiting for permission to enter, in rushed Miss Forster.

"Horrid, barbarous old cat!" exclaimed that young lady, throwing herself into a chair. "It is worse than being a governess, I declare! I could have struck her, I could!"

"I am not surprised: I expected it," replied Jessie, sobbing.

"Of course you did—we all did; but she need not have been so hard about it: she should bear in mind her own brother's doings. I've no patience with her! Can I help you, Jessie? let me pack that box;" and the next minute, Miss Forster was down on her knees, folding and refolding poor Jessie's fine clothes, and laying them smoothly in the trunk.

Jessie was glad of her help; and, while Miss

Forster packed, she dressed herself in her prettiest mantle and her white tulle bonnet, putting both on with the utmost care. "They will get less crushed on me, than in the box," she said, in explanation of the look of astonishment directed towards her by her companion.

Miss Forster smiled archly. "Do you hope to meet somebody on your way?" she asked.

"I hope, but I scarcely expect it, for Mr Linfoot cannot know that I am leaving this morning," replied Jessie; "so if he should come in this noon, will you tell him?"

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"Will you take this parcel on home then, carefully; it is white tulle to embroider, which Miss Crookes gave me to do: she is not quite so bad as she seems," said Jessie.

"Few folks are," replied Nellie, with a sigh, thinking of her father.

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"You need not come back here, Jessie, for I've almost done. I shall leave the key with Mrs Frankish, to give to Mr Wylie's clerk, when he calls for the rents on Friday. You'll find me down at Court Lane—make haste back."

And then the drooping butterfly girl went back down the shady side of the street towards the bridge, and the saddened work-a-day sister, with her heavy basket on one arm and her

bird-cage in her other hand, took her final farewell of their once pleasant home, and plodded away to the scene of her new toils, and temptations, and troubles.

It was a very bright morning towards the end of October. There was a glowing sun that gave a reminder of summer days; the crisp brown leaves from the trees in Old Court Yard had fallen, many of them, over the wall, and lay in a bed on the pavement. Nellie's feet lingered amongst them; she liked their rustling sound and earthy smell. I know not what thoughts of the country life she *might* have led, came across her as she crushed them under her lagging tread; but her heart bounded wildly in her breast, and she uttered a stifled cry. Then hurrying on, as if she dared no longer dwell on such a theme, she came opposite St Grim's church porch. The door stood open, and, scarcely knowing why, Nellie went in and walked half way down one of the side aisles. There was a wedding going on. She had no interest in the parties met together to pledge their faith to each other before God's altar, for better for worse, till death should them

part; but resting her basket on the stone floor, she stood amongst others looking on. The pair were young. The man had the air of a country youth, with ruddy brown skin and light curled hair; his partner, from her pale cheeks and her manner, looked altogether like a town-bred lassie. She was pretty, and seemed very content with her future prospects. There was not a tear amongst all the party; and, as they returned down the aisle to leave the church, Nellie followed them into the street and watched them out of sight, with a wild throb at her heart that almost choked her.

She did not envy the delicate bride, but she thought bitterly and hardly of the disproportioned lots of the children of men. All her dependence on God seemed like to forsake her: she felt at once angry and despairing. The old sexton came out of the church, and closed the door noisily behind him, locking it and bolting it; he turned and looked in Nellie's face, as he went by her, and smiled.

"You'll be coming to us soon, Miss, I expect," he said, jestingly, shaking his bunch of keys.

Nellie gave him a startled glance, and hurried away; and in a few minutes she was alone in her room, with all the rebellious feelings which the incidents of her walk had called up.

Jessie came in by-and-bye, looking utterly wearied and disappointed, for her walk had been unsuccessful. She cast a glance round the room, took off her things, and drew a chair up to the window.

"We must have no idle time now, if we would live," she said, as she unfolded the parcel Miss Crookes had committed to her, and drew through her fingers the glittering silver and gold thread with which it was to be embroidered.

"That will be a bonnie dress: do you know who it is for?" asked Nellie, leaning against the side of the window frame to watch her sister beginning her work.

"It is for young Miss Talbot of Houghton, to wear at the County Ball next week. I'll have to work hard; there are three flounces: push me a chair over, Nellie, will you?"

Jessie tossed up the light tulle on the

wooden chair, and then began to work from her pattern. She was a skilful embroiderer; but the worst of that kind of employment was, that it so poorly paid for the time it cost, and required, besides, that the needle-woman should not roughen her hands by engaging in any coarser kinds of work.

Nellie watched her for some time, and then she began to reduce the room into better order. The great clock stood up by the wall opposite the bed, and there was a low narrow table between them, on which she ranged the books she could not make up her mind to part with; the old family Bible being in front ready for daily use. The bird-cage was hung in the middle of the window, but her poor plants were obliged to be put out of the way, for Jessie said they shut out the light which she needed so much. Their father's chair stood in a corner by the fire, with a round table by it; there was the cat on the hearth purring before the fire; and the bed with its clean check curtains, like those before the window, made the whole look comfortable enough. When her polished candlesticks were

ranged on the mantle-shelf, and all odds and ends were put into a cupboard out of the way, Nellie called her sister's attention to it. Jessie raised her eyes, and gazed round, commended her sister's skill, and then went on diligently with her work. The old clock, with a preparatory whirl, struck two. Nellie recollected they had had no dinner.

"Jessie, let us have a cup of tea now. Mrs Renton has left my kettle full, and it boils just this minute: a cup of tea always refreshes me more than anything," she said.

The younger sister assenting, Nellie brought out, and placed on the round table by the fire a loaf of household bread and some butter, with two cups and saucers. Though the tea was by no means strong, nor yet of very superior quality, it restored the two girls to better spirits; and if their talk over it was not gay, it was at least more hopeful than it had been since the commencement of their troubles.

"I'm so glad we are together: we shall get through it all so much better than if we were alone," remarked Nellie. "I have a quantity of plain sewing from Swinton and Mar-

shall's; we shall not want for work, I hope."

Jessie observed that her sister had pushed the sugar-basin and the plate of butter to her side of the table, and was taking her own meal without.

"There will be money wanting to get a lawyer to defend father. We must be careful now, and never mind sugar and such like," observed she, eating her own crust dry.

"I hope we shall be able to manage. I must have some talk to Mr Wylie about it," replied Nellie. "It don't frighten me so much now I come to think more about it: it was so very terrible at first. After all, perhaps father may get off."

Jessie did not look hopeful; she shook her head, and was silent. Her appetite was soon satisfied, and then she went back to her embroidery.

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it: during all that week there were no visitors to break in on them. Only Mrs Renton came in to gossip a bit after tea; and on two occasions, she secretly slipped into Jessie's hand a letter with which she had been commissioned by Mr Linfoot. Both these letters Jessie took an opportunity to read when her sister was out of the way, and then hid them carefully in her work-box, which she kept locked.

This was not the beginning of deception; the poor girl little thought to what it would lead her; and though her conscience reproached her incessantly, she could not make up her mind to give all her confidence to Nellie.

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Jessie gave a blushing, glad assent.

"Oh! don't go, don't go!" remonstrated Nellie, as soon as they were out of the crowd.

"Indeed, I shall, Nellie: what can you mean?" returned her sister, hastily.

"I should be so much happier if you would give him up—nothing good can come of it. Oh, Jessie! do be warned!" pleaded Nellie.

"Whatever comes of it, I will not give him up; he loves me; it is few folks do now-a-days, I think. I shouldn't care what became of me if I hadn't Frederick to think of: it is the only bright bit there's left in one's life," replied Jessie, resolutely.

During the rest of the walk home the sisters kept silence.

In the afternoon, when Jessie was gone out, Nellie, with the great Bible on her knees, sat down in the window to read. It was a bright, though chilly day, and still she had not the heart to go out. The court was so quiet: there was no sound in the room but the ticking of the clock and the chirp of the canary. Nellie grew sadder and sadder amongst these home-like tones, and the volume on her lap lay open, but voiceless for her.

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Yet here was the end of all her love and all her carefulness. Nellie said bitterly in her heart that she was weary of her life; there was henceforth no joy, no hope: nothing but toil and shame—perhaps in the end, hard, grinding poverty.

Overhead, the blue, cold, autumn sky with fleecy clouds decking it, was visible above the roofs of the high, close houses. Nellie cast her eyes up towards it; and as the clouds went floating on, ever changing their forms of beauty, she watched them, and grew somewhat calmer: but it was a stony calmness,

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She had half hoped, half feared this. He did not offer her his hand, or speak, for a minute, but shut the door, and sat down in a chair opposite to the one into which Nellie had sunk on seeing him.

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"Yes! be like all the rest! do, Geoffry Meynell: reproach me, be angry, think yourself the most injured of men! It is all my fault—of course it is!" exclaimed Nellie, passionately. "I expected you would! it is not in the nature of men to think women can do anything that vexes them for a day or two, out of pure love for 'em! You're like all the rest!"

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He sat looking into the fire for five minutes or more, without answering her a word, his fine manly countenance utterly depressed.

As Nellie watched him, a hot flood of tears gathered under her eyelids; and when he looked up they were falling like summer rain. He was touched, and went over to where she sat, and wound his arm round her, raising her to his breast. Nellie laid her hand on his shoulder.

"You've cause enough to fret, Nellie. Why wont you give me a right to support you? why will you destroy our happiness?" he asked gently.

She raised her head, extricated herself from his embrace, and waved him from her.

"Oh, Nellie! there isn't a heart that loves you so truly as mine does, and yet you can't rest your head on my breast a minute to cry there!"

There was a pleading sorrow in his voice which she could not resist. She flung her arms round his neck, and sobbed long and passionately. For some time he held her, letting the violence of her passion exhaust itself. It was over

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a better man comes after me; and I've a long life afore me. Oh, Nellie! I would have loved you so! You don't know how bright that glen is in the summer time:—the garden is so bonnie with flowers, and the cottage is a beauty, though I say it. And of winter nights, when the wood fire burns in the chimney, think how snugly you would listen to the wind swirling across the Chase and through the woods; and maybe a bright face or two to look at, besides mine—for mine would always be bright to you, Nellie darling! Think, Nellie! Oh Nellie! if you would but let me make you happy!"

"And poor father, Geoffry!" said the girl mournfully: "how could I think of him? Don't, Geoffry, say any more: I must bide by what I've said. God's blessing could not be on the hearth for which a daughter forsook her father in his shame and misery."

"After all, Nellie, it is not settled yet," he said, catching desperately at the slightest thread of hope.

"No—but it's as good, or as bad, as settled," replied Nellie. "I have thought it might be

a mistake; but it was a silly fancy: didn't I see and hear father acknowledge it. Don't be buoying yourself or me up with any such false hope. Now, Geoffry, are you going?"

"No, not yet. I had such a deal to say to you before I came, and now it seems as if I had nothing," said the young man despondently: "and I'm thinking, Nellie, if your own heart hasn't an argument for me, it's little all my talking will do."

"Oh, Geoffry! I do love you! Oh, I do love you!" exclaimed Nellie. "It is not right to doubt that: you know I do. There isn't an hour in the days since last Sunday night that I hav'n't thought of you. I have been almost crazed with grief; only one can't sit down with one's hands in one's lap to cry in comfort when there's bread to be earned, and more besides. I've been thinking this afternoon, that all the joy falls to some folks, and all the sorrow to others."

"Nay, Nellie, surely you're wrong there," returned Geoffry Meynell. "There's my lady, now, Miss Talbot,—you'd think she has everything to make her happy: I'll never trust

to a woman's face again, if she isn't downright wretched, often! I meet her sometimes riding down the lanes; she scarce seems to see one: her eyes have got a queer far-away look, as if she was seeking something she'd lost. And she's a hard way with her to folks she takes again; and at church she stands up with her face looking down at the people, and it's my belief she never says a prayer, or thanks God for a mercy. She looks quite a sorrowful, proud, cold woman—and she is rich as rich can be!"

"No, it isn't money that makes happiness, perhaps," said Nellie, thoughtfully. "What is it? It isn't in this world after all—I thought it was; but I'm wrong: it hasn't taken me long to find it out, neither. But what's the end of all this talk, Geoffry Meynell? You must go as you came."

"Must I, Nellie—must I indeed? Don't you love me more than that? Hav'n't you a better word for me at all? Say you'll think about it; you'll take time to consider."

"I have thought about it, and cried about it, till I was almost at my wit's end. Where's the use, when a thing's right to be done, try-

ing to twist it to suit one's own convenience? I must give up you or father: father has most claim on me; father will be unhappy, alone, and poor—you are well-to-do, young, and helpful: I must go where I'm most needed."

"Say, at least, that if anything happens to him, you'll not have forgotten me. Promise to come back: I'll love you after ten—aye, after twenty years!" persisted Geoffry.

"Am I the girl to reckon on father's death? Oh, Geff.! I might be tempted to wish for it! I will not make any promise. I wont bind you —sure you'll be happy by and by, when you've had a year or two over our trouble. It comes hard at first I know: am I not in the same grief, and greater still? But all is not over, surely, of one's life's good, at twenty. Keep a brave heart, and it will go over with you:—I know it will. But I'll never forget—never, as long as I live—what you have said to me today:—how you would, loaded with shame as I am, have taken me to your home and your bosom."

"Good Nellie! Oh Nellie! is it the last time, then, I must see you?" and as he spoke Geoffry

stole his arm round her, and drew her to his bosom, looking down with such regretful love.

"Surely it is, Geoffry. Don't come near me again—I could not bear it," said Nellie, the tears rolling down her cheeks, and the wild sobs agitating her frame. "Oh! go, Geoffry: go now: you break my heart to see you so! Father, father! what have you done?"

"Recollect, Nellie, there's always a friend who'll be glad to help you. You wont let me be more to you now; but if you need one to care for you, think of me:—will you, Nellie?" whispered Geoffry, his own voice trembling with the excess of his emotion.

She gently extricated herself from his arms, threw her own round his neck, kissed him passionately, and then bade him "Go—go!" while she sank into a seat fairly exhausted.

Geoffry stood for a minute looking at her through dimmed eyes; then he turned towards the door, and, with many a longing, lingering thought, he left the house.

The afternoon had closed in quite dusk, and Jessie had not returned, when poor Nellie re-

covered from her last paroxysm of sorrow. In spite of her own absorbing grief, this prolonged absence of her sister began to cause her great uneasiness. She went to the window and looked out: the stars were bright in heaven, and a light wind had risen. For half an hour she paced the room to and fro—then listened: St. Grim's clock struck six. The sound had scarcely ceased when there came a step up the stairs—not quick and springing, as Jessie's usually was, but lingering and slow. Nevertheless it was Jessie's, and she entered the room.

"You're late, darling," said Nellie, coming to help her off with her things.

"Hav'n't you had tea yet?" asked Jessie, without noticing the remark, and keeping out of the circle of light which the fire gave.

Nellie lighted a candle, and said she waited for her, and then she told her she had seen Geff. Meynell.

"I needn't ask what you said to him—one can see from your eyes," replied Jessie, coming to the table and looking at her.

Nellie glanced up at the blooming face so near her, and sighed.

wooden chair, and then began to work from her pattern. She was a skilful embroiderer; but the worst of that kind of employment was, that it so poorly paid for the time it cost, and required, besides, that the needle-woman should not roughen her hands by engaging in any coarser kinds of work.

Nellie watched her for some time, and then she began to reduce the room into better order. The great clock stood up by the wall opposite the bed, and there was a low narrow table between them, on which she ranged the books she could not make up her mind to part with; the old family Bible being in front ready for daily use. The bird-cage was hung in the middle of the window, but her poor plants were obliged to be put out of the way, for Jessie said they shut out the light which she needed so much. Their father's chair stood in a corner by the fire, with a round table by it; there was the cat on the hearth purring before the fire; and the bed with its clean check curtains, like those before the window, made the whole look comfortable enough. When her polished candlesticks were

ranged on the mantle-shelf, and all odds and ends were put into a cupboard out of the way, Nellie called her sister's attention to it. Jessie raised her eyes, and gazed round, commended her sister's skill, and then went on diligently with her work. The old clock, with a preparatory whirl, struck two. Nellie recollected they had had no dinner.

"Jessie, let us have a cup of tea now. Mrs Renton has left my kettle full, and it boils just this minute: a cup of tea always refreshes me more than anything," she said.

The younger sister assenting, Nellie brought out, and placed on the round table by the fire a loaf of household bread and some butter, with two cups and saucers. Though the tea was by no means strong, nor yet of very superior quality, it restored the two girls to better spirits; and if their talk over it was not gay, it was at least more hopeful than it had been since the commencement of their troubles.

"I'm so glad we are together: we shall get through it all so much better than if we were alone," remarked Nellie. "I have a quantity of plain sewing from Swinton and Mar-

shall's; we shall not want for work, I hope."

Jessie observed that her sister had pushed the sugar-basin and the plate of butter to her side of the table, and was taking her own meal without.

"There will be money wanting to get a lawyer to defend father. We must be careful now, and never mind sugar and such like," observed she, eating her own crust dry.

"I hope we shall be able to manage. I must have some talk to Mr Wylie about it," replied Nellie. "It don't frighten me so much now I come to think more about it: it was so very terrible at first. After all, perhaps father may get off."

Jessie did not look hopeful; she shook her head, and was silent. Her appetite was soon satisfied, and then she went back to her embroidery.

After Nellie had put away the things after their frugal meal and made the hearth all tidy, she brought out her plain sewing and began to stitch industriously. In this quiet way the day passed over, and many more like

it: during all that week there were no visitors to break in on them. Only Mrs Renton came in to gossip a bit after tea; and on two occasions, she secretly slipped into Jessie's hand a letter with which she had been commissioned by Mr Linfoot. Both these letters Jessie took an opportunity to read when her sister was out of the way, and then hid them carefully in her work-box, which she kept locked.

This was not the beginning of deception; the poor girl little thought to what it would lead her; and though her conscience reproached her incessantly, she could not make up her mind to give all her confidence to Nellie.

On the Sunday morning they went together to St Grim's church, where Jessie had the satisfaction of seeing her lover in the gallery, directly opposite to her during the whole of the service. When they came out, Mr Linfoot contrived to join them, and to whisper a request that Jessie would join him in a walk during the afternoon on the river side.

Jessie gave a blushing, glad assent.

"Oh! don't go, don't go!" remonstrated Nellie, as soon as they were out of the crowd.

"Indeed, I shall, Nellie: what can you mean?" returned her sister, hastily.

"I should be so much happier if you would give him up—nothing good can come of it. Oh, Jessie! do be warned!" pleaded Nellie.

"Whatever comes of it, I will not give him up; he loves me; it is few folks do now-a-days, I think. I shouldn't care what became of me if I hadn't Frederick to think of: it is the only bright bit there's left in one's life," replied Jessie, resolutely.

During the rest of the walk home the sisters kept silence.

In the afternoon, when Jessie was gone out, Nellie, with the great Bible on her knees, sat down in the window to read. It was a bright, though chilly day, and still she had not the heart to go out. The court was so quiet: there was no sound in the room but the ticking of the clock and the chirp of the canary. Nellie grew sadder and sadder amongst these home-like tones, and the volume on her lap lay open, but voiceless for her.

Her training had been religious up to the time of her grandfather's death; and, as we have seen, the charge he had given her had been most strictly kept towards her sister, as coming from one who was no more. She was devotedly attached to Jessie; her interest and her good were invariably the first consideration: she had been the home-worker, the main-stay of her father's house; she had made sacrifices of personal comfort where such had been necessary; she had been a faithful daugh- and a faithful sister.

Yet here was the end of all her love and all her carefulness. Nellie said bitterly in her heart that she was weary of her life; there was henceforth no joy, no hope: nothing but toil and shame—perhaps in the end, hard, grinding poverty.

Overhead, the blue, cold, autumn sky with fleecy clouds decking it, was visible above the roofs of the high, close houses. Nellie cast her eyes up towards it; and as the clouds went floating on, ever changing their forms of beauty, she watched them, and grew somewhat calmer: but it was a stony calmness,

out of which came no good or gentle thoughts. She began to feel that it was no use struggling against a dark and inevitable fate. The world was unequally dealt with: had she not seen it writen so many times in her father's favourite books? Yes! Surely it was most unequally dealt with:—Splendour, pomp, luxury to a few; pain, toil, weariness to millions! Perhaps it was right—perhaps. *She* could not think so, however. The white clouds went brightly on, and then became faintly traced on the deepening azure of the sky.

The room began to look gloomy in its distant corners, the fire was burning low. Jessie would be back presently; so Nellie rose and bestirred herself, to make the room more cheerful-looking: she stirred the fire, heaped on more coal, and made preparations for their evening meal. The bird perked up in his cage, and began to sing; the cat came and rubbed himself against her feet.

"Poor puss, I'll soon have nothing left of the old home but you," said Nellie, looking down at him.

The evening now began to darken in very